

STAR
WARSTM

STAR WARS™

Last of the Jedi Omnibus

Volume One

Jude Watson

 **SCHOLASTIC**



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Last of the Jedi: The Desperate Mission
Last of the Jedi: Dark Warning
Last of the Jedi: Underworld
Last of the Jedi: Death on Naboo
Last of the Jedi: A Tangled Web
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Includes

Last of the Jedi

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Crimson Empire

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STAR WARS: A New Hope**

40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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STAR WARS

LAST OF THE JEDI

THE DESPERATE MISSION

BY JUDE WATSON



NEW YORK • LOS ANGELES

Chapter One

Dusk always took him by surprise. On this two-sun world, it started early, one sun dropping first, then the other chasing behind it in a fast slide to the horizon. Harsh sunlight gave way to long shadows that painted the canyon floors with gray.

Another day gone. Another day to come. Each one the same.

Obi-Wan Kenobi ducked his head as he exited his small dwelling on Tatooine. It was time to make the journey over the arid landscape of the Jundland Wastes. Time to lurk above a moisture farm and watch a small baby crawl around the compound. Time to reassure himself that one more day had passed, and Luke Skywalker was well.

He made sure the door was secure. The Sand People were wary of him, but he was careful with security. No one was safe from the savagery of their foraging raids.

His dwelling was small and simple, a hovel, really, carved out of the canyon wall. He had made it comfortable—not because he cared about his comfort, but because it gave him something to do. In those first, raging months, it had soothed him to sweep the drifts of sand from the floors, fashion a heating system, repair a cracked wall that let in breaches of sunlight in the early morning and spewed tiny volcanoes of sand during the fierce, frequent windstorms.

Jude Watson

He had found the home by accident, by luck. He had simply begun riding his eopie in a widening circle around the Lars farm until he found someplace close enough to hike to the farm but far enough away that the family would not take much note of him. A transient, looking to start a farm or trade with Jawas had abandoned it, most likely. No doubt he or she had eventually discovered that only the hardest and luckiest survived on Tatooine.

Owen and Beru Lars knew he was here. Their friendship with him was an uneasy one; they knew he had saved Luke, but Luke's aunt and uncle also knew the threat that he'd brought with him to Tatooine. They were aware that he came by to observe the boy, but it was agreed that they would ignore him, so Luke would learn to ignore him, too. He was grateful for their vigilance, for it meant that they were vigilant against strangers as well.

And who could blame them? Obi-Wan thought, trudging through the sand. Luke had been born in a time of violence and misery. Naturally they would want to protect him. They would not want him to end up in the hands of the Empire—or the Sand People. Or end up like Obi-Wan, a warrior turned into an old man overnight by sorrow and grief.

Was there anything inside him anymore? He wondered this, lying on his sleep couch at night, staring at the rough stone ceiling. How could a being be numb and full of pain at the same time?

There had been so many that he cared about. And now just about everyone he'd loved was dead.

The names and faces would begin in his mind. Qui-Gon. Siri. Tyro Caladian. Mace Windu.

The apprentices—Darra Thel-Tanis. Tru Veld. Their Masters—Ry-Gaul. Soara Antana.

And the Jedi slaughtered in the purge. For it had been just that—a slaughter, shocking, devastating, quick...but not quick enough for the victims.

STAR WARS: The Desperate Mission

His dearest friends, Bant and Garen. The imperious Jocasta Nu. The gentle Ali Alann and Barriss Offee. The warriors—Shaak Ti, Kit Fisto, Luminara Unduli. And the great Jedi Masters—Ki-Adi-Mundi, Adi Gallia, Plo Koon....

Gone. The word would toll in his head.

Gone.

Gone.

Jedi he'd fought alongside, studied with, laughed with—a roll call of the dead that thumped out a drumbeat of pain with every heartbeat.

And then, as dawn would bring a blush of light to his ceiling, he would turn, as he always did, to the last, worst thing. The thing he could not avoid looking at, the thing that gave him the most awful pain.

The boy he'd raised and loved like a son had become a traitor. A killer. A monster. A convert to the dark side, a testament to Obi-Wan's failure to guide, to protect. The boy, Anakin Skywalker, had died at the hands of the Emperor, and the Sith Lord Darth Vader had been born in his place.

At first, Obi-Wan had thought that Anakin had died in the flames of a volcano on Mustafar. It was months later that he'd realized what had happened, that the Emperor had kept him alive, or, at least, the part he wanted to remain—the hate and the power. Obi-Wan had seen Darth Vader's image on a datarecorder he'd found in an alley of Mos Eisley—it contained a HoloNet report—and he had known at once, with a sense of shock so profound it had made him ill, that Lord Darth Vader had once been Anakin Skywalker.

The only being in the galaxy who could understand the depths of his grief was in exile as well, and he was forbidden to contact him. Yoda was on Dagobah, living in isolation in the middle of a swamp so hidden no one would venture there.

And the spirit who could help him, who had promised to help him—Qui-Gon—could not appear to him. Instead, he had only heard his voice.

Jude Watson

*You are not ready for the training.
But I am, Master. I have nothing else now.
That is why, my Padawan, you are not ready.*

It was hard not to feel impatience, even anger against Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan struggled with this emotion daily. It was his Master who had charged him to take Anakin on as his apprentice. And now it was Qui-Gon who was withholding the knowledge he'd learned from the Ancient Order of the Whills, a training that could bring Obi-Wan some measure of peace. He could learn to be one with the Force but retain his consciousness.

Would that mean he could lose this pain, this grief? Obi-Wan wondered.

Obi-Wan saw the Lars homestead ahead. He stopped for a moment to make sure that Owen was not patrolling the perimeter. It was late, the shadows long, the suns slipping behind the hills. Beru and Owen were always sure to be inside the belowground compound by dusk.

He walked forward, feeling as much a shadow as the ones that reached out like fingers from the hills. He bent down, flat against the ground, and looked over the rim into the main courtyard below.

The baby had hair full of sunlight, and it glinted, even in this dusky light. He was laughing as he crawled after a ball that Beru rolled away from him. Was it Obi-Wan's imagination, or was the boy able to slow the ball without touching it? If the Force was there—and he knew Luke was Force-sensitive—he did not know if the boy was aware of it. Not yet. Not for a long time, if ever, without training.

Beru rocked backward from her perch on the doorstep, laughing. Usually, she had something cooking about now, and she would disappear inside for a few seconds to check on it. Luke would crawl to the doorway and watch her. He seemed to feel a need to keep her in sight.

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Obi-Wan heard Beru's laughter, saw Luke tumbling and laughing with her. He was not even tempted to smile. Seeing Luke gave him satisfaction, but he had left smiles and laughter behind him, part of another life.

Satisfaction was enough for him now. He had promised Padmé that her children would be safe, and he had made it so. Leia was growing up on Alderaan, the adopted daughter of Bail Organa, the kindest and noblest man Obi-Wan knew, and his wife, the Queen. He wished Padmé could know that her children were more than well-cared for—they were loved.

But Padmé—fierce, sad, beautiful Padmé—was dead, too.

Owen Lars emerged from the dwelling. That was Obi-Wan's signal to leave. Darkness was falling fast, and Owen was about to activate the KPR perimeter droids. Obi-Wan lingered for a moment, watching as Beru pretended to chase Luke inside the dwelling. He saw the light spilling out from the doorway and could almost feel the gentle heat, almost smell their food.

He turned his back against it and felt the chill against his face. Without anyone noticing, Obi-Wan Kenobi walked away into the growing darkness.

The next night, Obi-Wan maneuvered through the noisy crowd at the cantina in Mos Eisley. He journeyed on an eopie through secret trails to the spaceport once a month for supplies, and always under the cover of darkness. When he did, he always stopped at the cantina. It was a magnet for the worst of the galaxy—itinerant space pilots, adventurers, criminals. Creatures who greedily supped on gossip and rumor as well as bantha stew and ale. Obi-Wan needed to keep in touch with what was happening in the galaxy. He could withdraw, but he had to stay informed.

The Galactic Senate was still operating, but it served more as a discussion group than a governing body. The Emperor controlled the majority, who simply approved of anything he

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proposed. Bail Organa was still there, fighting when and how he could. He refused to give the Emperor the satisfaction of seeing him resign. Obi-Wan kept up with these happenings, but he resolved to keep his distance from them. He saw the daily erosion of liberties from afar, as though they had no relation to how he lived his life any longer. If he allowed himself to feel frustration or rage, he was afraid it would overtake him.

He wore his hood low over his face and picked a dark corner. Thanks to a liberal use of bribes, the one-eyed Abyssin bartender watched out for him and made sure he was left alone. Here he was Ben Kenobi, a half-crazy hermit who had no need for companionship. A drink was brought by a scurrying waiter, who set it down and ran off to service a table of traders almost ready to brawl before their multi-colored concoctions arrived.

Obi-Wan had chosen his table carefully. He recognized one of the group sitting next to him, a space pilot named Weasy. He was a muscular, hairy Bothan who was known for taking on any cargo, no questions asked. He was also an excellent reporter of information who did not exaggerate. He sat with the other pilots, well into a large pitcher of ale.

Obi-Wan gathered the Force to help him filter out the noise and hone in on what the pilots were saying. He listened for a moment to make sure they were relatively sober. He was used to the boasts and fabrications that made up “news” in this cantina.

“Travel restrictions getting tighter,” one of the pilots was saying, his antennae waving in anxiety. “It’s getting harder to bribe officials. They’re all scared...of what, I don’t know. Rumors going around of punishments for corruption.”

The other pilot snorted. “Bribes aren’t going to stop, even in the Empire.”

Weasy took a draft from his mug. “Long as it’s something they get a piece of, they’ll keep looking the other way.”

“Look, I’m not complaining,” the first pilot said. “The Empire has improved my business. No more space pirates on the

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run to the Rutan system. But they're clamping down now. Did you hear what happened on Bellassa?"

"Sure, they came in and deposed the governor, stuck in their own guy," the second pilot said. "So what? They've done that on plenty of worlds. They like to tell the governments what to do. They don't like governors who actually govern." He guffawed at his own joke.

"Yeah, well, they had some trouble on Bellassa. Stubborn, those beings are. All the citizens took to the streets," the first pilot said. "There were mass arrests in every city. I think they must have arrested half of Ussa. I'm telling you, this is the start of something big."

"I was caught at the spaceport when it happened," Weasy said. "Everything was shut down because someone escaped from prison, and there was a full-scale alert to catch him."

Obi-Wan put down his drink. There wasn't anything here to interest him. Just the usual gossip. The various crackdowns of the Empire weren't news.

"Just one guy, can you imagine? And they held up transit for a week. I was cooling my heels—wasn't even allowed to leave the Ussa spaceport," Weasy went on.

Obi-Wan stood. The noise of the cantina engulfed him as he allowed the Force to ease.

"...so I say to myself, who is this Ferus Olin anyway?" Weasy finished.

Ferus Olin.

The name sent a jolt through his body.

Slowly, Obi-Wan sat down again. He tuned out the noise to listen. He wasn't going anywhere tonight. Not until he'd learned all he could about Ferus Olin.

Because at one time Ferus Olin had been trained as a Jedi.
And now, he might be one of the only ones left.

Chapter Two

“Anybody who gets the attention of the Empire has to be brave or crazy,” the first pilot said.

“Or dead,” the second said, and they all laughed.

“I hear he’s both brave and crazy,” Weasy said. “But not dead—not yet, anyway. They ordered extra troops because of him, and they’d already imported one of those Imperial battalions. He was running rings around the stormtroopers. Became a legend on Bellassa.”

“So what happened to him?”

“Nobody knows. He escaped. They’ve got a major hunt on for him—want to make him an example for others who might try to rebel. Worth a bounty or two, if you’re interested.”

“Not me,” the first pilot said. “I don’t tangle with the Empire. Even to help them. Best to stay clear. Pass me that pitcher, will you? I’m still sober.”

“His partner is still in prison,” Weasy said. “I guess they’re thinking Ferus Olin will try a rescue, but so far, he’s stayed gone.” He grunted as he put down his mug. “He’d better stay disappeared. I’m making another run to Ussa tonight. Supplies are low there, and there’s credits to be made.”

Obi-Wan sipped his drink, trying to make sense of the feelings tangling inside him.

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Ferus was alive. Obi-Wan had assumed he was dead.

Ferus had been a Jedi apprentice. It didn't matter that he had left the Order at the age of eighteen and had been a civilian since then. He had been one of them, and he was still alive.

He had kept track of Ferus in the beginning. He'd always thought that after the Clone Wars he would contact him. After they had defeated the Separatists.

That was before he understood how the dark side would not be defeated so quickly.

He knew Ferus had started a business with a partner, Roan Lands. The two had hired themselves out to governments interested in protecting citizens who were whistleblowers—those who exposed wrongdoing in especially vicious corporations. Ferus and Roan found them new identities and kept tabs on them.

Obi-Wan didn't know much more than that. He'd heard that Ferus and Roan became officers in the Army of the Republic during the Clone Wars, but he'd never had the time to track them down.

After Anakin had turned to the dark side, Obi-Wan had cause to remember Ferus. It had been Ferus who had first warned him about Anakin. Ferus who had sensed that Anakin's great gifts hid great unrest. Ferus who saw Anakin's power—and feared it.

He owed him.

"All I know is, the next time you go to Bellassa, you won't have a problem," the second pilot said. "Ferus Olin will be dead."

Obi-Wan sat, his hands in his lap, his mind busy. He felt feelings working in him that he had not felt for a long time.

In another life, he would not have hesitated. He would have taken off for Bellassa. But everything had changed. He was charged to remain here and watch over Luke. Luke and his sister were the last and best hopes for the galaxy. He must be protected. Obi-Wan had promised Yoda, he had promised Bail

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Organa, he had promised Padmé on her deathbed that he would watch over him.

Until the time is right, disappear we will, Yoda had said.

But Ferus had a call on him, too.

He could not contact Yoda to ask for advice. Qui-Gon was not readily available to him. He had to decide. He had to take the responsibility.

Just as I took responsibility for Anakin.

Yes, and look what occurred because of your judgment....

The voices in his head were familiar but no less real. Trusting himself had become difficult.

His duty was to protect Luke. He would stay. And if he came to regret that decision, he would learn to live with it. Just as he'd learned to live with all the others.

Obi-Wan stepped outside and took a breath of the cold air, hoping it would chase away the noise and smoke of the cantina. He looked around for his eopie. Eopies were not known for their intelligence, but this particular beast could manage to slip out of constraints and wander, greedy for the sand lichen growing just beneath the dirt. Gathering his cloak around him, Obi-Wan began to search, berating the eopie in his head. *You'd think if you fed and cared for a beast it would reward you for your loyalty, not take off at the first sign of frost.*

"It is not the eopie you're angry at." The voice was dry, amused. "Here you are, a Jedi Master, and you still haven't learned to correctly identify your feelings."

Qui-Gon's voice seemed to come from the shadows. Obi-Wan stopped short. He was overcome. It was his Master. Even just the sound of his words recalled in Obi-Wan's mind Qui-Gon's kind, rugged face. And there, the ironic twist of his smile.

"You said I wasn't ready to begin the training...."

"You aren't," Qui-Gon said. "But you do need help."

Chapter Three

“You’re here,” Obi-Wan said. The words felt thick in his throat. He felt a rush of emotion at hearing Qui-Gon again.

Obi-Wan had ducked into a vacant building across from the cantina. The derelict shelter had no roof, so the stars shone clear above.

“I have always been here,” Qui-Gon said. “Being ready is your choice, my Padawan.”

“But I *do* choose,” Obi-Wan said. “I want to begin the training. I don’t understand what you mean.”

“When you know why you are not ready, you will be ready,” Qui-Gon said.

“Now you sound like Yoda.”

“Thank you for that honor,” Qui-Gon replied, his voice coming from both the stars and within Obi-Wan’s own head. “Now here I am, watching you hunt around for an eopie—which is right behind the cantina, by the way—instead of paying attention to your feelings.”

Obi-Wan sighed. He felt old, older than old. Yet it appeared he still had so much to learn.

“The Living Force, my Padawan,” Qui-Gon said. “It includes knowing yourself as well as others.”

“What are you asking me?”

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“Simply this: What are you feeling?”

“Overwhelmed to hear you.”

“That’s a start.”

“Angry at the copie—”

“Not so. Try again.”

“Irritated at your riddles—”

“Good! Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“Angry at myself,” Obi-Wan burst out.

Qui-Gon said nothing. Obi-Wan’s heart was so full. He couldn’t speak for a moment. Memories flooded him, years of missions, of conversations, of the many ways Qui-Gon had helped and guided him. After his death, Obi-Wan had missed his Master every day of his life.

“Tell me,” Qui-Gon said gently.

“I’m angry at my own confusion,” Obi-Wan said at last. “I used to make decisions so easily. I knew what course to take, and I took it. If another Jedi was in danger, I went. And now, although my mission is clear, my mind is not. I want to go. But I am charged to remain here. Luke is the new hope for the galaxy, and I must protect that.”

“All this is true,” Qui-Gon said. “But it’s not the only truth. Hope doesn’t spring from one root.”

“Meaning?”

“If Luke has a destiny, so does Ferus. If the Empire is to be defeated, if balance is to be regained in the Force, resistance will come from many places. All of this together will make the difference.”

“You think I should go?”

“It is your choice to make, Obi-Wan. You must follow your feelings. I can only tell you what I see. I can assure you of this—leaving now will not endanger the boy. That much I know. The other is something that you know, too—that if Luke is to rise, he must have something to join.”

“So Ferus might be a part of that.”

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“Speak of what you know about Ferus, not what you can guess.”

“He was the most gifted apprentice, second only to Anakin.”

“With so many gifts, he is a formidable opponent of the Empire.”

“But I would have to leave Luke alone,” Obi-Wan said again. It was a duty that Yoda had charged him with, and he knew it was vital.

“You will not be leaving him alone. I will watch over him. He will be safe for a time. There *is* danger for Luke, danger that is close. I can feel it, but I can’t see it. I sense that Ferus is the key.”

Obi-Wan was startled. “Ferus knows about Luke?”

“No, it is not that easy. I sense a connection...though Ferus doesn’t know it’s there.”

Certainty flooded Obi-Wan. Certainty, and relief. All of his feelings had pointed to this. He wanted to help Ferus if he could. “Then I must go.”

“At last,” Qui-Gon said, “you speak with your heart.”

There was so much more he wanted to say, and even more he wanted to ask, but Qui-Gon’s presence faded. Obi-Wan was left feeling shaky, but at least he had a direction.

He waited outside in the cold, no longer feeling it. Customers emerged from the cantina, many of them staggering. He was relieved when Weasy came out alone. Even better, he walked with a purposeful stride. He was sober, at least.

Obi-Wan followed. After he had gone a few steps, Weasy sensed someone was behind him and whirled around.

“Who is it?”

Obi-Wan stepped a bit closer. He had deliberately let Weasy know he was being followed; as a Jedi, he could follow him easily without being seen if he wanted.

“Oh, it’s you.” Weasy still eyed him warily. “Don’t believe I ever caught your name, but I see you in the cantina.”

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“Ben.”

“Well, Ben, what can I do for you?”

“Passage to Ussa.”

Weasy’s eyes narrowed. “Dangerous place, Ussa.”

Obi-Wan waited.

“Still, it’s no concern of mine, if you’ve got the credits.”
Weasy named the price.

Obi-Wan handed him the credits, nearly the last of those brought with him from Coruscant, and Weasy turned and began to walk, not waiting to see if Obi-Wan would follow.

“My transport’s at the spaceport. Mind you, I don’t like any chatter on the way to Ussa. I don’t need to know your life story, or you mine. Got that?”

“I don’t think that will be a problem,” Obi-Wan said.

Weasy led the way to the landing platform. He waved at a Corellian star yacht. “Climb aboard while I do the preflight check.”

Obi-Wan climbed aboard and took his seat. Within minutes Weasy stomped aboard and sat in the pilot seat. The engines hummed to life, and they shot off into the darkness. They left Tatooine’s atmosphere, and Weasy set a course for Bellassa.

Chapter Four

Bellassa had been a thriving world with an elected government when the Clone Wars began. It had sent an army to fight alongside the Jedi against the Separatists. It was an open, peaceful world with many resources, and so, when the Empire was established, it was targeted for domination. Its governor was deposed, and crackdowns on personal liberties began. Journalists were silenced. Dissenters were jailed.

This much Obi-Wan already knew. But it wasn't nearly enough. In the old days, he would have contacted Jocasta Nu at the Temple and asked for details. After admonishing him that he could look up things just as well as she—which, of course, wasn't true in the least—she would put her hands on information in several seconds that could have taken him hours to find.

Obi-Wan felt a lurch of pain deep inside him. *Madame Nu, killed in her beloved library.*

The Jedi Temple in flames.

He pushed the images out of his mind. He could not function if he allowed them to linger. He had to experience the pain, and let them go.

“Here we are.” They were the first words Weasy had spoken since they'd left Tatooine. “Security checks before we land.

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They'll want to know what I had for breakfast. They'll want to know what my *mother* had for breakfast."

After an extensive check, the ship was cleared to land. Weasy dropped into a vacant area near the edge of the spaceport. He activated the landing ramp, then turned to Obi-Wan as he grabbed his ID docs and ship specs. "Passengers check in over there. I have to arrange for docking. Good luck to you."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Thanks for the lift."

"And Ben?"

Obi-Wan turned, already impatient to be gone.

"You owe me a pitcher in Mos Eisley."

Obi-Wan realized that in his own gruff way, Weasy was telling him to be careful. He nodded and stepped out onto the ramp.

It was early morning, and the spaceport on Ussa was already bustling. He checked in with security and then stood for several long moments on the landing platform looking down at the city, trying to orient himself. Even though he had a map on his datapad, it helped to see the ground.

Ussa was a city of circular districts built around seven lakes. The housing and commercial buildings were kept to low height limits. Wide boulevards ran in concentric circles around each lake. It was—had been—a pleasant place to live.

He could see the Commons, a large green park at the very center of the city. It had once been a meeting place, a place of celebration and community. Now a gigantic black structure crowded out most of the grass. Trees and native shrubs had been razed to accommodate it. The Empire had imported an Imperial garrison, a huge prefabricated structure that contained barracks for stormtrooper battalions and a large jail for the overflow of prisoners.

He could feel it rising up from below. The city of Ussa was now a city of fear.

He took the turbolift down to ground level. It was a cool cloudy day that threatened rain. Obi-Wan blended in with the pedestrians, dodging speeders and air taxis as he made his way

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through the streets. It was strange to be on a populous world again, strange to feel cool air. He had been alone so long. He slowed his pace as he approached the Commons. The presence of stormtroopers was heavy here, as they filed in and out of the garrison. The sight of the soldiers and the building had a chilling effect. When the Clone Wars began, the stormtroopers had stood for the safety of the Republic. Now they were instruments of intimidation.

And it was he who had found them on Kamino. He who had brought them to the attention of the Jedi. They had thought the vast armies of stormtroopers would help them after the Battle of Geonosis. Instead, they had been tricked. Betrayed. Obi-Wan watched the white columns march through the streets, watched how the people shrank before them, and his feelings of guilt and despair washed over him again until his footsteps faltered and his ears rang with the menace of their footsteps.

People tried to avert their gazes from the garrison but shot sidelong glances of apprehension at it. So many streets fed onto the Commons that they couldn't avoid it, but they stopped speaking as they passed. Even footsteps seemed hushed, and paces quickened as the Bellassans hurried by.

Obi-Wan's steps quickened again along with the rest. His first stop would be at Ferus's old office. It was on a street in the Cloud Lake district, a long walk that would also give him a sense of the layout of the city.

He had seen this before. All the signs were here—the menace in the air, the strange silence. The troops in the streets, the black speeders racing by, filled with uniformed officers. Obi-Wan knew well the techniques of a powerful force tightening its grip on a once peaceful society. But this was worse. It wasn't just fear in the air—it was terror.

It began to rain, a fine mist that made the air shimmer. Cloud Lake was a silver disc ahead as he walked through the streets surrounding it.

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Ferus's office was shut, blinds drawn. Outside a small lasersign read OLIN/LANDS. That was all. It was a quiet street, one of the outer bands from the lake, which was visible only as a haze of light in the distance. Shops and a café surrounded Ferus's office door. Small businesses, mostly—an accounting office, a tailor, a store selling ceramic teapots and plates.

The door of the tailor shop was directly opposite. A sign outside read MARIANA'S EXQUISITE DESIGNS AND ALTERATIONS, FOR ALL YOUR TAILORING NEEDS. Obi-Wan crossed the street. On the door, a small, hand-lettered sign read CLOSED, but the door was slightly ajar. He pushed it open and heard a buzzer go off inside.

A plump woman of middle years hurried out from a back room. Her hair was braided in thick plaits around her head, but it had been done hastily, and strands trailed to her shoulders. "I'm sorry, we're closed," she said in a pleasant tone, but clearly, she was busy.

"Sorry to disturb you," Obi-Wan said. "I'm looking for Olin/Lands."

Her smile dimmed. "That business has been shut down."

"The sign is still on the door."

"They did not have a chance to take it down. I'm sorry—"

"Do you know what happened to them? I had an appointment—"

"I'm sorry. I can't help you."

The note of finality in her voice was unmistakable. Obi-Wan bowed his thanks and went out. A short, narrow alley led to the back door of the shop. The back door was closed, but behind a series of garbage bins Obi-Wan could just make out a gravsled wedged against the wall. A young boy lounged on it, kicking his legs. He looked to be about twelve or thirteen, thin and wiry, with a narrow face and a shock of bluish hair.

Obi-Wan strolled up the alley. "Do you work at the tailors?"

The boy gave him a sharp look. "We're closed."

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"I heard. But maybe you could help me. I rang the bell at Olin/Lands, but nobody answered."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

With customer service like this, it was a wonder that the shop could survive. "I was wondering if you knew what happened to them."

"No."

"Do you know whether they'll be back—"

"No. Look, I'm about to make a delivery, so—"

"Do you know anyplace else I can get information?"

"No, but I know where you can get a new traveling cloak." The boy gave him an appraising look. "You could use a new one, if you ask me. We've got everything—romex, chaughaine, leathris, even armorweave. But you look like a Ramordian silk kind of guy. You can pull it off."

There was the slightest trace of a snicker on the boy's face. For some odd reason, Obi-Wan was reminded of Anakin as a boy. Anakin had this same way of slyly teasing him while struggling to keep a neutral expression on his face. It had both charmed and irritated him. Every time a memory of Anakin as a boy came to him, a fresh pain startled him, like an electrical charge.

"No, thank you." Obi-Wan turned and walked down the alley, chased by the boy's guffaw, which he had finally allowed to surface.

He crossed the street again and headed for Dorma's Café on the other side of Ferus's door. He ordered the special. He sat at the counter, the only customer in the place. The woman behind the counter had a broad, plain face and a warm smile.

"Not very busy today," Obi-Wan remarked. He had to work to make his comment sound natural, relaxed. It had been so long since he had to make small talk that it was an effort to remember how to do it.

"Not very busy any day," the woman replied. "That's the way it goes. The neighborhood used to get foot traffic. But nobody

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wants to walk around the city these days. Businesses closing up every day.”

“Must be hard,” Obi-Wan said.

The woman pointed with her chin across the street. “Mariana—the tailor shop—she’s barely hanging on. Poor dear. Who has the credits for new clothes now except the Imperials?” She bit her lip and glanced toward the door. It wasn’t safe to say such things, he knew.

“I noticed the business next door is gone.”

She nodded, and he could see the sadness in her eyes. “The poor fellows.”

“What happened?” Obi-Wan asked.

He saw the way she closed down. He could almost feel what she thought. A stranger, asking questions. Could be an Imperial spy. This is what happened in the new galaxy. The simplest exchange was complicated by fear, by wariness.

“Ferus Olin was a friend of mine,” Obi-Wan said. “I came a long way to see him.”

She turned away and started to wipe the counter. “If you’re a friend, then you should already know what happened. And you’d know better than to say that you are one.”

The conversation was over. He would not get any information from Ferus’s neighbors. Out of loyalty or fear, they were keeping their mouths shut.

At least the meal was good. Obi-Wan bent over, inhaling the aroma, and took another bite. Qui-Gon would advise him to eat. He never believed in wasting an opportunity, even for food. He remembered one of the life lessons of the Masters when he was just a Padawan, something Qui-Gon liked to quote: *When food arrives, eat*. Of course, the saying meant more than that. It was about enjoying what you have in the moment. But Qui-Gon’s kindness had always extended to recognizing the hunger of a growing boy.

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He was about to compliment the woman on her cooking when they both heard the sound of thudding boots outside. The woman ran to the window.

“A stormtrooper raid,” she said, fear in her voice.

“Why?”

“They don’t need a reason. Go. If I’m empty, they might not come in.”

Obi-Wan found himself thrust out the door into the street. The stormtroopers were kicking in the door of an art gallery several doors down. He did not want them to question him. The ID docs Bail had acquired for him were good, but as an outlander he ran the risk of being detained.

Obi-Wan turned and began to walk away.

“You there! Halt!”

He kept on walking. There was an alley just ahead.

He heard the stormtrooper’s quick steps behind him. Obi-Wan made a sharp right into the narrow alley.

He was almost knocked over by a gravsled careening down the alley, the same one that had been standing outside the back door of the tailor shop. Now it was piled with durasteel bins full of clothing. Obi-Wan stumbled backward in time to see the surprised face of the boy, who was piloting the gravsled.

Obi-Wan leaped aboard.

Chapter Five

“Hey, get off!” The boy tried to push him. He was surprisingly strong.

Obi-Wan held him off with one hand as he crouched and grabbed the controls with the other. He saw the stormtrooper stop and look around. He hadn’t seen Obi-Wan yet. The piles of fabric and cartons and the high sides of the gravsled obscured him.

The boy kicked him hard on the shin. Obi-Wan winced. The gravsled lurched, and the stormtrooper looked over and called, “You there! Stop that gravsled!”

Obi-Wan hit the brake and did a reverse spin, heading in the opposite direction. The clumsy gravsled could barely execute the maneuver, but it managed it. One of the things he’d learned from Anakin was that most machines could perform beyond their capacity if you pushed them in the right way. He had seen Anakin do incredible things with a gravsled.

Obi-Wan made a sharp right and careened up an alley.

“What are you doing, you stinking monkey-lizard!” the boy screamed. “I was here first!”

He made a sharp left and pushed the speed past maximum.

“Those are Imperial stormtroopers!” the boy yelled.

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Gently, Obi-Wan pushed the boy onto an overturned bin. “Relax.”

A speeder bike roared around the corner behind him, then another. Two stormtroopers. Good. Two was better than one. They’d get in each other’s way.

The boy rose, fists clenched, and charged. Summoning the Force, Obi-Wan took one hand off the controls and raised the other. The boy could not move. His eyes were wide.

“You’ll get your gravsled back. Just don’t move.” A gentle Force-push, and he landed back on the bin. This time, the boy stayed there.

The gravsled’s controls were hot underneath his hands. They shook. He was pushing the machine well past its limits.

Just hold on a little longer, he told it.

They were in a warehouse district now. Parked along the streets were construction vehicles with hydrolifts, bigger gravsleds than this one, and hauler speeders. One of the stormtroopers flew higher, intending to come down on him from above. The other leaned to the right. They were trying to box him in against the large warehouse to his right.

Timing was everything. And a gravsled wasn’t nearly as agile as a speeder bike. But one thing he’d learned about the stormtroopers was that despite their weaponry, their unflagging energy, their relentless need to get the job done, they did not have much imagination. They could not strategize. They could only follow orders.

Moving at top speed now, Obi-Wan had to summon the Force and use it. His vision became sharp. Time slowed down. Ahead he saw a construction crawler mounted on a track that ran up the side of a building. The workers had halted in the middle of a job restoring the stonework on the front wall.

Obi-Wan unclipped his lightsaber and kept it by his side, hidden by his cloak. He had to keep it hidden unless absolutely necessary; if it was discovered that he was a Jedi, he would soon have the whole planet looking for him. He lurched the gravsled

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higher, knowing he only had a few seconds before the swoops rose to follow. As he passed the crawler, he reached into the cab of the vehicle and slashed at the instrument panel with one clean, accurate strike.

The immense crawler fell with a crash. It flattened the two swoops before they could dodge out of the way.

Obi-Wan zoomed away, free...and uneasy.

Obi-Wan pulled the gravsled to a halt on the border street to Bluestone Lake near the Commons. Here there was traffic and pedestrians. They would be less noticeable.

As soon as he stopped the gravsled, the boy rose in indignation. "You could have killed me! And you put stormtroopers on my tail!"

"No, I didn't. No one saw you but the two who just got flattened by the crawler," Obi-Wan said. "You'll be fine."

"I'm not fine!" the boy shouted. "I don't know what you're up to, but count me out." He began to throw bins off the gravsled. "Take it and get out of here!"

"Hey! What are you..." Obi-Wan stopped, remembering the boy's cry, *I was here first!* How he was loitering around the alley. He had just assumed the boy worked for Mariana the tailor. The boy had intended him to.

"Hold on," he said, taking a bin from the boy and throwing it back down. "You weren't making a delivery. You were stealing these clothes."

The boy stuck out his chin in a challenge. "You're one to talk. You stole them from *me!* Well, keep them. See what happens when *you* try to sell them."

Obi-Wan leaned against a stack of bins. "Not very nice of you to take advantage of other people's misfortunes, you know. That tailor is close to going out of business."

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He heard himself—that tone of voice that Anakin had always resisted. Obi-Wan waited for Anakin’s sharp response...then realized it would never come.

Instead, there was this boy, who snorted in disgust. “And now I’m being lectured. This is one swell, full-moon day. What are *you* running from, chief?”

Obi-Wan let a moment go by. He glanced over toward the lake. A vendor stood selling juice and snack foods under a flexible, clear umbrella. He would take his next step from Qui-Gon. Boys were always hungry.

“How about some food?”

The boy snorted again. “Thanks for the invitation, but get lost.”

Obi-Wan jumped off the gravsled. He walked over to the vendor and bought two juice packs and a package of sweetsonberry rolls.

He could feel the boy still hesitating. He took a large bite of roll. Not bad.

Obi-Wan sat on a bench. He put the other juice pack next to him and pushed it and the remaining sweet roll toward the middle of the bench. He took a sip of juice.

The boy leaped off the gravsled and walked slowly toward him. He perched on the other end of the bench. Then, suddenly, he snatched the roll. He unwrapped it and began to munch.

“So what’s your name?” Obi-Wan asked.

“What do you care?”

“Just making conversation.”

“So now that you bought me food, I have to be your friend?”

“Well, friendly, at least.”

The boy opened the juice pack. “Trevor,” he said.

“I’m Ben,” Obi-Wan said.

“Well, Ben, you look like an outlander to me,” Trevor said, waving the roll. “So let me give you some advice. If you want a piece of the black market here, you’re going to run into problems. We’re a tight group. We don’t like outsiders.”

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“Where are your parents?”

“Dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why? You didn’t kill them.”

“What happened to them?”

Trever shrugged. “My mother was a captain in the Grand Army of the Republic. She died in the battle of T’olan, in the Wuun system....”

Obi-Wan nodded. “I know it. That was a terrible battle.” It had been early in the wars. Trever must have been about nine years old.

When Trever didn’t add any further information, Obi-Wan gently asked, “Your father?”

“He worked for a med clinic—he was a doctor. He died right after the end of the Clone Wars. The Empire sent troops here right away. They wanted to take over the planet’s defense system—for our protection, they said.” Trever snorted. “So a bunch of Ussans decided to peacefully occupy the defense plant in protest. He was inside when the plant blew up. Boom. Bye, Dad.”

Obi-Wan knew the boy’s attitude was masking a deep pain—a pain felt by so many throughout the galaxy.

“So who takes care of you?” Obi-Wan asked.

“No one.”

“Don’t you have an aunt, or uncle—”

“There’s nobody, okay?” Trever took another bite of the roll. He didn’t express any emotion. Obi-Wan waited while he chewed and swallowed. “I can take care of myself.”

Obi-Wan shook his head. He knew every price paid in war, he thought. Every suffering. Every injustice. They were all heartbreaking, but one was worst of all. War made orphans.

“So that’s why you learned to steal.”

“I move around a lot. The security forces in Ussa are busy with other things. People get distracted when there’s an occupation. And I know places to go, people who’ll give me food

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or a place to sleep. Dorma gives me a meal sometimes. And Ferus used to—”

Trever stopped.

“So you *do* know Ferus Olin,” Obi-Wan pointed out.

Trever said nothing.

Obi-Wan continued. “He used to help you, too, didn’t he?” Trever remained mute. “Listen, Trever, I need your help. I’m a friend of Ferus Olin. An old friend. I heard he was in trouble. I’m just trying to find him.”

The boy chewed, then took a sip of juice. “What’s in it for me?”

“Ferus helped you. Don’t you want to help him? Don’t you want to stop the Empire from destroying your planet?”

“I said, what’s in it for me?”

Obi-Wan sighed and pushed over a few credits.

As Trever snatched them up, his dark eyes studied Obi-Wan. “How did you get that crawler to smash down?” he asked.

“Where is Ferus?”

“How did you get me to stop moving like that? Who are you?”

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is that I can help Ferus. Have you seen him since he was arrested?”

Trever’s face went hard. “He’s dead.”

“How do you know?”

“Because they want him dead. And they get what they want.”

“But you don’t know for sure.”

“I know for sure that if he wasn’t dead, he’d be here. He would never let Roan stay in prison. He would try to rescue him.”

Obi-Wan let out a breath. Ferus wasn’t dead. Trever didn’t know anything for sure.

“I had a brother, too, you know,” Trever said suddenly. “Tike. He was in that defense plant, too. He’d been too young to join the Army of the Republic, but he wanted to defend Bellassa. That’s why my dad went into the plant. He knew Tike was inside,

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and he offered to negotiate a deal between the protestors and the Imperials. But once he was inside, they blew up the building.”

A remembered feeling rose in Obi-Wan—fury. He knew what the Empire was capable of. They were led by a Sith, and they had cruelly slaughtered the Jedi and caused the death of millions. It hadn’t only been stormtroopers who had turned on them. He would have to struggle to subdue his fury, because he knew it would only cloud his mind. He had to turn it into calm action.

He took a breath and looked out at the lake. “Everyone I loved is dead, too, Trever.”

Trever balled up his wrapper and his empty juice carton and tossed it into the trash. “Yeah. Well. They crush everyone in the end. The point is to stay alive.”

Obi-Wan wanted to tell this boy that merely being alive wasn’t enough. Survival was easy. Living with purpose was hard. But the boy was too young to know this.

“I think I can save Ferus. I think he’s still alive.”

“How do you know?”

“I think I would know if he was dead.” Even as Obi-Wan said this, he wondered if it was true. With a dark side so powerful, could the Force still be trusted?

Disbelieving in his own way, Trever snorted.

“Don’t you believe in connections between two people?” Obi-Wan asked.

“I believe in my connection to myself. That’s about it.” Trever eyed him, then seemed to make a decision. “Come here.”

He led him back to the gravsled. “You think I’m taking advantage of Mariana? That’s a laugh. Her shop is doing just fine. She just doesn’t want anyone to know that.”

“What do you mean?”

Trever pushed aside the items on top of one of the piles of clothing. Underneath were Imperial uniforms.

“Laundry and mending,” the boy said. “For them. For the whole garrison.”

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“Well,” Obi-Wan said. “She has to make a living, doesn’t she? And they have to get their clothes cleaned.”

“Sure, why not help out the pack of murderers who stole your planet?” Trever’s face was flushed. He kicked another bin. “You know what these are? Prison uniforms! They have so many of us in jail they can’t keep up with supplies! And there’s stacks and stacks of more material in her shop. She hides in there, making prison uniforms for her own people. I think that stinks like a monkey-lizard in a hot sun. She deserves to get robbed! Nobody else in Ussa would cooperate with them—but she did.”

Obi-Wan climbed up on the gravsled. He looked down at the uniforms, bright yellow, so prisoners could be easily seen. There were bins and bins of them, and she was stocking material for more? How many Ussans did the Imperials plan to arrest?

His boot hit something metallic, and he bent down. His fingers closed over a small object. It was an Imperial code cylinder—a device that would allow the user to access computer information or gain entry to restricted areas. It must have fallen out of a pocket of one of the uniforms during the wild ride.

He slipped it into his own pocket.

“So what do you say now, chief? Why shouldn’t I steal the clothes?” Trever asked him impatiently.

Obi-Wan thought a minute. The code cylinder would only be good for a short period, until the soldier realized he’d lost it. But he would turn his quarters upside-down to find it before reporting it missing. A missing code cylinder would earn a severe penalty.

“Does Mariana know these have been stolen?”

“Nah, she has a routine. I waited for her to leave, then I broke into the shop. She goes to pick up the prison laundry every day at ten.”

Obi-Wan checked his chrono. “We have to get the clothes back to the tailor shop,” he told Trever. “The garrison can’t know that they’ve been stolen.”

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“We?” Trever backed away. “Do you want to know the secret of my success? I don’t volunteer for anything. Ever.”

“You were going to sell these clothes, weren’t you? I’ll pay you what they would have sold for—if you’ll bring them back. Name your price.”

Trever named a figure.

Obi-Wan grimaced. “I’ll give you half of that. And I’ll add some extra if you can find out anything about Roan Lands.”

Something flickered in Trever’s eyes.

“You know something,” Obi-Wan observed.

Trever shrugged.

Obi-Wan handed him a credit. “I’ll give you half now, half later.” The boy was turning out to be expensive, but he had a feeling that Trever could tell him things he needed to know.

“My father’s old partner—she runs a med clinic. They took Roan Lands there. They nearly killed him, and they want him alive. They brought him there in secret.”

An Imperial speeder cruised slowly by, and Obi-Wan and Trever casually turned away. The speeder kept going.

Trever hopped from one foot to the other. “It’s not such a good idea to stay in one place for too long in Ussa, you know. We should get moving. We can take the gravsled back now.”

“First I need you to drop me off at the med clinic and wait for me.”

“Didn’t you hear me? I’m not the volunteering type.”

Obi-Wan leaped onto the gravsled. “I don’t know whether you’ve noticed, but I only paid you half your fee.”

“How do you know I won’t take the money, drop you off, and then steal the clothes anyway?”

“I’ll take my chances,” Obi-Wan said.

“Brave guy.”

“And besides,” Obi-Wan said, “if you do leave, I’ll find you.”

Chapter Six

Well, here he was, on a mission. Something he'd never expected to happen again.

Obi-Wan rolled his cloak into a tight ball and tossed it behind a bin. He stepped into a pair of coveralls. Trever drove the battered gravsled well, executing tight turns and negotiating traffic. It was Qui-Gon who had taught Obi-Wan that on a mission, anyone could be helpful, from an elder to a boy like this one.

It felt familiar to be heading toward possible danger. Familiar to keep his gaze moving, checking out the street and airplane traffic, always alert to the need for a possible escape route. The slight elevation in his pulse rate told him he was ready for whatever came.

It was all familiar, and yet everything had changed. He was alone. Once he had thrived in a flourishing network of support, thousands of Jedi all over the galaxy. There was information and help at the Temple when he needed it. Now there was nothing. There was no one. And no planet was looking to the Jedi for help any longer.

He was the last. And this mission would probably be his last, as well.

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They cruised past the clinic. Obi-Wan crouched behind the bins. He wouldn't be able to get in using the code cylinder; that was reserved for garrison security.

"You won't get in," Trever said.

"I'll get in."

"Well, if you do—which you won't—find Dr. Amie Antin. She's the one they brought Roan to. Up ahead." Trever pointed to a small gray building up on the left. Two stormtrooper guards stood outside. "Don't let the two fool you. There's security everywhere. On the roof, too. Nobody gets in or out without a check. If you're bringing in laundry, you need to be on the manifest."

"I'll figure it out. Just stop for a few seconds, long enough for me to jump off. Then wait in that alley there. I won't be long."

"You got it."

The gravsled slowed. Hoisting the bundle of laundry on his shoulder, Obi-Wan jumped off. He headed up the stairs without a backward glance.

One stormtrooper stepped forward, blaster rifle at the ready. "State your business."

"Laundry delivery," Obi-Wan said.

"Let me check the manifest."

Obi-Wan waved his hand. "You don't need to check it. The laundry can go on through."

"I don't need to check it. The laundry can go on through." The stormtrooper gestured him forward. Obi-Wan walked past them, keeping the bundle on his shoulder. He sneaked a backward look. Trever had halted in the alley. But when he saw Obi-Wan pass the checkpoint, he waved and zoomed away.

So, he couldn't trust the boy. It wasn't a surprise. He'd find his own way out.

Inside, he hurried past the initial examining rooms where patients sat waiting to be checked in by a med droid who was entering information. He expected that Roan Lands would be held in one of the back rooms.

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He passed a harried-looking medic. “Laundry goes that way,” the medic said brusquely, pointing to a set of double doors.

Inside was a large utility closet. Obi-Wan put the laundry bundle down, then quickly stepped out of his coveralls and stuffed them into a trash bin. He took a med tunic off the shelf and slipped it on. Then he walked out into the corridor again.

No one stopped him this time as he continued down past a desk full of medics entering information into computers and checking on medicine carts. Someone was delivering food trays. Obi-Wan went unnoticed in the hubbub.

It didn’t take him long to find the room where Roan Lands was kept. Two stormtrooper guards stood outside. Obi-Wan strode forward.

“I’m here for a consult on the prisoner,” he said. “Requested by Dr. Antin.”

“She didn’t mention anything.”

“She doesn’t have to clear medical decisions through you,” Obi-Wan said crisply. He started to walk around them, but the stormtrooper held up his rifle. “I need to see your ID docs.”

Just then the door opened slightly. A woman in a med tunic stood there. She was of middle years, and beautiful, with a strong face and piercing black eyes. Her white-blond hair was cropped close to her head.

“Who’s this?”

“He says you asked for a consult, Dr. Antin,” the stormtrooper said.

Obi-Wan put his hand casually at his side, ready to reach for his lightsaber. He stared right at Dr. Antin. Only a moment went by as he felt the sharpness of her gaze on him.

“Yes. Come in, doctor.” Dr. Antin held the door open wider.

Obi-Wan walked in. He could see he was in a med room for the sickest patients. There was a med cocoon on one wall, and a variety of instruments. A young man lay on the bed. His green eyes were open but stared blankly up at the ceiling. He didn’t move. His dark hair flowed to his shoulders, and he appeared to

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be powerfully built. He was still dressed in a prison tunic of bright yellow.

“Your diagnosis, doctor?” Her voice was crisp.

“I—”

“Don’t bother, I know you’re not a doctor, and we might not have much time. Are you from the Eleven?”

Sometimes, if you didn’t answer a direct question, you would get the information that you need. Obi-Wan waited.

“Look, I’ve been over this with Wil Asani. I sympathize with what you’re doing, but I can’t get involved. Too many patients here depend on me for treatment. I’ll give you information, that’s all, and not much of that.” Dr. Antin sighed and looked at Roan. “You can tell Wil that I don’t know what’s wrong, and I don’t know if he’ll survive. They want me to keep him alive, but they won’t tell me what was administered. It wasn’t Loquasin or Mangoriza—not the usual suspects. I’ve given him Spectacillin—he’s got a slight infection, but that’s not what’s killing him. And I’ve done a gas binder on him—that should rid his blood of leftover toxins. But unless I know exactly what was administered, I can’t treat him. He’s too unstable. I could kill him. I’ve seen these cases before. The Imperial Prison must be trying out a new drug, something I don’t know about. What’s obvious to me is that they don’t have an antidote either. They just hope I find one. I’ve done a lot of research on neurotoxins, so I suspect that’s what it is.”

She placed her hand on Roan’s shoulder. “He’s just got to hold on. Let’s hope for the best.”

She looked up at Obi-Wan. “I can walk you out. But don’t come back. This is all I can do.”

Obi-Wan heard a commotion outside. Dr. Antin frowned. She hurried to a vidscreen and the monitor sprang to life. On the screen was the dismaying sight of stormtroopers pouring through the front door of the clinic. In their midst strode a tall figure, dressed in a maroon robe in a shade so deep it was almost black—as though, Obi-Wan thought, he wanted to appear as

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close to the Emperor as he could without impersonating him. His hood completely covered his face.

“Malorum,” Dr. Antin breathed. “This isn’t good.”

“Who’s he?” Obi-Wan asked.

“One of the Inquisitors—a group set up by the Emperor himself. He’s here as chief of security on the planet. He arrived with a team to train the newly formed Surveillance and Security Corps. They’ll be part of the Imperial Security Bureau. The ISB needs a local presence to go after you and your group.” She whirled around. “Don’t you know this?”

“You could say I’m the new guy,” Obi-Wan said.

“It’s too late to get out. You have to hide.”

Obi-Wan felt something quicken in the air. The Force? It wasn’t strong, it was just a flicker, but it had been so long since he’d felt it from another source rather than himself.

He looked back at the monitor. Malorum. That was the source of the Force.

Who are you, Malorum?

“Come on!” Dr. Antin hurried him toward the wall. She pressed a button and opened the med cocoon. They could hear noise in the hallway now, the boots thudding.

“Just don’t forget to get me out,” Obi-Wan said, as she shut the door of the cocoon on him and locked it.

Obi-Wan had to gather the Force in order to hear what was going on outside the cocoon. The words were muffled, but he could make them out.

“My patient is very ill. I do not allow visitors!”

“I’m hardly a visitor.” The voice was soft. “Some advice, doctor. Keep in mind that you have already come to our notice.”

“Yes, you are very good at noting things. I am here to serve my patients. Not your rules.”

“And would you have patients if we shut down your clinic?”

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"You can't do that. Even the Empire doesn't want to shut down hospitals, to have the sick dying in the streets for lack of care."

"I assure you, the Empire does what benefits the galaxy as a whole. It is not logical to consider the rights of the few against the many. We bring freedom to many, but it requires sacrifices. I'm sorry that you don't see that."

"Nice rhetoric. You speak of freedom, but you imprison without charges or trial."

"A necessary adjustment to the law. These are dangerous times."

"You administer illegal drugs for the purposes of torture."

Obi-Wan couldn't believe it. He knew Dr. Antin was afraid; he could feel her fear. Yet she was combating Malorum, refusing to back down.

He felt the rumble of Malorum's anger.

"Enough. You have trespassed on my good nature, Dr. Antin."

He could visualize Dr. Antin's raised eyebrow when she heard "good nature."

"You are on dangerous ground. We know you have ties to the Eleven."

"That is untrue."

"You treated one of them."

"I am here to serve the sick."

"You have a son, isn't that right? Adem, yes?"

Dr. Antin said nothing, but Obi-Wan could feel her fear escalate...as well as her anger.

"He is ten, I believe. Walks himself to school—imagine that."

Obi-Wan wanted to open the door of the med cocoon, confront Malorum. But he had a feeling that Dr. Antin could take care of herself.

"That's right," Dr. Antin said. Her voice was quiet, just as soft as Malorum's. "He is a schoolboy, and only cowards threaten children. Is that part of your grand scheme for the galaxy?"

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“You are hiding Ferus Olin. You’ve seen him. We have reports of a suspicious character entering the clinic.”

“That was a doctor I called for. Dr. Merkon,” Dr. Antin said. “He left.”

“We have no record of him leaving.”

“Then recheck your records,” Dr. Antin snapped.

“You will be hearing from us, Dr. Antin.”

Obi-Wan heard the footsteps retreat, and the dark evil in the room followed.

A moment later the cocoon door burst open.

“There’s no time to waste,” Dr. Antin said. “I have to get you out of here.”

“I can get myself out.”

“No, they have the place in lockdown. I have a way.”

“He threatened your son.”

The color had drained from her face. Her lips were almost white as she said, “Yes. That was his mistake. Before, I tried to be neutral. I am no longer.”

She glanced at the med couch. “And we must take Roan.”

“Take him where?”

“To your safe house, of course. To the Eleven.”

Obi-Wan only hoped that Dr. Antin knew the way.

Chapter Seven

With the help of Obi-Wan, Dr. Antin loaded Roan into the med cocoon. The room opened directly onto a small landing platform, where a medical speeder waited. Dr. Antin deftly removed a panel on the side of the speeder. There was just enough space for Obi-Wan to crouch.

“I had it built during the Clone Wars,” she said. “Comes in handy from time to time.”

Obi-Wan slid into the space, tucking his legs in.

“Hang on,” she warned. “I like to drive fast.”

She slid the panel back into place. He felt the engines rev underneath him, and then they shot forward.

Apparently there was a checkpoint, because she slowed a moment later.

“Patient transferring to contagious disease clinic,” he heard her say.

“Authorization?”

“Here.”

He waited.

“All clear.”

The speeder shot forward again. He felt it twist and turn, the engines running fast. After a time, the engines powered down to a purr. Then they stopped.

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The panel was lifted off. "Welcome home," Dr. Antin said.

Obi-Wan could see that they were in a small interior holding pen. Several other speeders, most of them battered older models, were scattered around the space.

"I think it's time I told you," he said. "I'm not—"

Suddenly a door burst open, and a Bellassan stood there, blaster rifle in his hands. He was short and compactly built, with graying hair. Obi-Wan tensed, but the man merely frowned at Dr. Antin.

"Amie. I didn't expect you."

"We couldn't warn you. I had to bring him back quickly. The clinic went into lockdown."

The man's silver gaze traveled to Obi-Wan. "Who's he?"

"Isn't he...one of you?" For the first time that day, Dr. Antin faltered.

The man held his blaster rifle on Obi-Wan. "I'm afraid not."

Dr. Antin backed away and went to stand beside the man. "I'm sorry, Wil. I just assumed..."

"Later." Wil walked a bit closer to Obi-Wan, the blaster rifle still aimed at his head. Obi-Wan could tell by the way he handled the weapon that he was an excellent shot. "Why don't you fill us in?" he said.

"My name is Ben," Obi-Wan said. "I am an old friend of Ferus Olin. I heard about his difficulties and came to help him, if I could."

"Who sent you? Who are you working for?"

"I work alone," Obi-Wan said. "I heard Roan Lands was in the clinic, so I went to see him. I thought he might give me a clue."

"How did you know Roan Lands was in the clinic?" Dr. Antin asked sharply.

"A boy I met on the street told me. His name is Trever."

"Trever Flume?" Dr. Antin looked truly startled. "You saw him? Is he all right?"

"He seems to be able to fend for himself."

Jude Watson

"I knew him years ago," she said to Wil. "His family was all killed. His father was a colleague."

Wil still had not lowered the rifle.

"Wil, I must see to Roan," Dr. Antin said. "He's in the med cocoon."

"You brought him here?"

"I can treat him here just as well," she said. "I think the Emperor's forces were planning to take him back to prison. They'd given up on keeping him alive."

"All right." Wil looked at Amie Antin searchingly. "And you? Are you going back?"

"No. I am one of you now. Malorum threatened Adem, and that was the final straw."

"We will protect your son. I will send someone now."

"Thank you."

Wil turned his attention back to Obi-Wan. "I'll call the others. We'll deal with the prisoner."

Prisoner? Obi-Wan thought. That didn't sound good.

He sat in a small room with five men and five women, one of them Dr. Antin. Ten hostile gazes were now trained on him along with one blaster rifle.

"Why did you say you were with the Eleven?" one of them asked.

"I didn't," Obi-Wan said. "I just arrived on your world today. I don't even know what the Eleven is."

"We are a group dedicated to fighting the Empire," Wil said. "Eleven of us began the group, but now we number many more. We—" Wil gestured around the room "—are the core."

"I'm afraid I can't take that distinction," Amie Antin said quietly. "I have joined the Eleven today. I should have joined before."

"We accepted your reasons to stay neutral, Amie," Wil said. "They were good ones." He turned back to Obi-Wan. "We

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began by operating a shadownet—news that goes out to the rest of Bellassa. We transmit news of what is happening—what is really happening, not what is on the Empire-controlled HoloNet broadcasts. We also do targeted raids. This is no secret. It's why the Empire wants to find us. They've tried to infiltrate us with spies before."

"I told you, I'm not a spy. Just a friend. Is Ferus one of the Eleven?"

"Ferus and Roan began the group," Wil said. "This is well-known, even by the Empire. That's why they were targeted. We don't know how the Empire found out they were in the group, but we know we weren't infiltrated. Until now."

"I don't want to infiltrate you," Obi-Wan said. "I want to help you."

"We can't let you leave here."

"I'm afraid you can't stop me."

Wil pointed his blaster rifle. "Bravado is stupid when one is looking down the barrel of a blaster."

"You will be making a great mistake," Obi-Wan said quietly.

Wil pondered for a moment. "If you truly know Ferus, you know his secret. He shared it with us. You know how he spent his early years."

Obi-Wan hesitated. "Ferus had special gifts...." He saw the others exchange glances. They knew. He would not be telling them anything Ferus had not already confided. Ferus trusted these people. "He was studying to be a Jedi. He lived at the Jedi Temple on Coruscant."

"And you know this because..." Wil stopped. "There is only one way you could know it. You are a Jedi."

"If he were really a Jedi he could have disarmed you in two seconds," a dark-haired woman said scornfully. "I don't believe—"

Obi-Wan waved his hand. Wil's blaster flew from his hand into Obi-Wan's. Obi-Wan then tucked the blaster rifle into his utility belt, and sat down again. He would only use his lightsaber

Jude Watson

if he had to. And he didn't have to yet—that much was immediately clear.

“Oh,” the woman said, her eyes wide.

Wil's look of dumbfounded surprise slowly changed to a grin.

“Welcome to the Eleven,” he said.

“You have trusted me with your secret,” Obi-Wan said. “Now I have trusted you with mine.”

“We will keep it,” Wil said. “But we don't know where Ferus is. I, too, suspect that Roan might know.”

“He and Ferus were very close,” a woman with crisscrossing blaster holsters across her chest said. “Roan once told me that they had a plan if they were forced to go underground.”

“The Empire has made him a priority,” Obi-Wan said. “Already today I have seen two raids.”

“They've closed down the whole city,” Dr. Antin said. “They won't give up.”

“We have to find him before the Empire does,” someone said. It was a tall man with a grave face who had not spoken before. “They are widening the net. Starting with Ussa and working outward to the countryside. They will cover all of Bellassa if they have to. They want to send a message with Ferus—that rebellion will not be tolerated, that resistance will be overcome. This is much bigger than one planet. This is how the Empire expects to control the galaxy. Bellassa is just a first step among many first steps.”

This made sense to Obi-Wan. And now he knew why he had to be here. He wasn't just helping an old friend. He was helping to start the spirit of rebellion. If Ferus was caught, it would send the message throughout the galaxy that all rebels would be captured. But if Ferus could remain free...well, then hope would also remain free.

“We had not heard this, Loran,” someone murmured. They all exchanged worried glances.

“Ferus is more than a man to the Bellassans. He is a symbol,” Wil said.

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“And he is our friend,” the dark-haired woman said softly. “We have no leader, we are all equal here, but...”

“Yes, Rilla, Ferus was our leader,” Wil said, nodding. “He was the one who bound us together.”

“I miss his jokes,” the woman with the holsters said.

“He made us brave,” a man said. “I joined because of him.”

Obi-Wan couldn't believe what he was hearing. The Ferus he had known as a boy had been a careful rule-follower. His skills had been excellent, but his style lacked Anakin's brilliance. What had Ferus said to him once? Everyone liked him, but no one was his friend. This sounded like a different Ferus. Ferus a magnetic leader? Ferus with a sense of humor?

Yet it was Ferus who had seen into Anakin's heart. It was Ferus who had stood up to him, to Anakin's Master, and said, *Something is not right here*. It had been a brave move for a Padawan, to challenge a Master about his own apprentice. Perhaps it shouldn't surprise him that Ferus was now capable of this. The seeds for leadership had been there. He just hadn't seen them....

Because he'd always been thinking of Anakin. He had been the Chosen One. And their closeness had blinded him.

“Ferus will return for Roan. He thinks he's still in prison. We must find him and tell him not to return.”

“Roan knows where he is,” the woman named Rilla said. “I know he does.”

Everyone looked at Dr. Antin. She spread her hands. “I'm sorry. The best I can do is keep him stable and hope he fights his way out of it. Neurotoxins are tricky. Antidotes are powerful. I could kill him.”

“So if you knew what they gave him, you could save him,” Obi-Wan said.

“I think so,” she said.

“Amie Antin is one of the top experts in the galaxy in neurotoxins,” Wil said. Obi-Wan heard the pride in his voice and saw the way his gaze softened when he looked at her. “If she can't save him, nobody can.”

Jude Watson

“And I could save others, as well,” Dr. Antin said. “These fiends will use anything to get what they want. Our prisons are crowded with political prisoners.”

Obi-Wan fingered the Imperial code cylinder in his pocket. “I will get you what you need.” He looked up at the ten troubled faces around him. “All I have to do is break into the Imperial garrison.”

There was a shocked pause.

“Ah,” Rilla said. “Now I *know* you’re a friend of Ferus.”

Chapter Eight

Ferus Olin had always promised himself to take a vacation in the fresh mountain air. Now here he was. A mountain cabin, a sky full of stars. He should be thankful. Take the time to breathe, rest, get strong.

Yeah, he'd be thankful, all right. If he weren't about to go stark raving insane.

Ferus stretched out one leg, then the other. The wound was almost healed. The dizziness every time he'd stood had passed. Every day he felt stronger. Dona had brought him medicine—bacta and Polybiotic for his wound, as well as herbs and tonics from this mountain culture. She'd brought him food—too much food. She cooked soups and breads and roasts, and was always trying to tempt him. He'd eaten so much soup his eyeballs were floating. She'd ministered to him with great patience and kindness, and he wanted to repay her care by busting out of here as fast as he could.

Ferus groaned softly as he rose from his sleep couch. If he stayed in one position for any amount of time, his leg stiffened.

The room was spare, with only a chest of drawers and a place to sleep. It was dark, even though it was midday. Dona had made curtains out of armorweave and kept them tightly closed.

Jude Watson

Dona didn't believe in ornamentation. She spent her days on the mountains, gathering herbs and hunting, or making the long trip down the mountain to the village for supplies. Ferus couldn't go, couldn't even help her gather wood for the fire, because to step outside could mean death. He had been trapped in this tiny stone cabin for a week now.

It was like being in prison again, without the torture. That is, if you didn't count Dona's constant chatter.

They didn't get much news from Ussa here. They were so isolated that it took days, and the connection to the HoloNet went in and out. There was no shadownet for real news, only the Imperial-controlled information, so he didn't know what was true. As far as he knew, Roan was still in prison. He did not like to think of what was happening to him there. But he was. Every moment.

Ferus waved his hand over a sensor to crack the heavy curtain. He stood by the window that looked down to the valley. He opened it slightly to take a breath of the frosty air. The snow was deep in midwinter, dimpled and splashed with blue from the light bouncing down from the sky. They were above the treeline here, surrounded by rocks and cliffs. The native *pinir* trees were far below, magnificent specimens with straight trunks extending hundreds of meters into the air, punching the sky with their spiky tops.

Down the mountain was a small collection of dwellings that was barely a village. This used to be a mining town in the old days. When the ore had run out, the people had left. But some had stayed, for some reason Ferus could not fathom. The winters were harsh, the summers brief. The nearest village was an hour away.

A little too much isolation for his taste. He liked cities.

Funny, Ferus mused, staring down at the winter landscape. As a Jedi, he really hadn't known what he'd preferred. Jedi didn't care about choices. They were sent here, or sent there. They took a space-liner or a crowded freighter. They ate fine food or they

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ate slop. None of it mattered. The only thing that mattered was the mission.

It had taken him months and months as a private citizen to figure out that he could make choices. That he could prefer one thing over another. The city to the country. The color blue to the color red. Every day he made thousands of decisions, and he had to think about every single one of them. In the beginning, it had been exhausting and infuriating. He had hated himself for his hesitations; he used to be so decisive. He had met Roan one morning in a café, when Roan had burst out laughing at Ferus's long consideration of whether he wanted a muffin or a roll. Roan had tossed both on Ferus's tray with such genial good nature that they had taken breakfast together and talked until lunch.

The memory of Roan's booming laugh made Ferus's chest feel tight. After leaving the Jedi, he had felt as though the ground was dissolving under his feet. He had wandered from planet to planet. The Jedi had given him enough credits, contacts, and help to start a new life. But those practical things had not helped with the bewilderment he felt.

It was Roan who had saved him. Roan who had shown him what it meant to have a home. When Ferus had come up with the idea for the business, Roan had sold everything he had to finance it. They had become partners as well as friends.

He and Roan had made an agreement as soon as they had pledged to fight the Empire: If one of them was able to escape, he would not return for the other. They had pledged this using the Bellassan method of grasping each other's shoulders and looking into each other's eyes.

Ferus had pledged his honor, and yet he knew he would break that pledge in a heartbeat as soon as he was able. Every day he was stronger. Every day he was one day closer to leaving.

He heard the creak of the door behind him. Instinctively his hand went to his belt. It had been years since he'd left the Jedi, and he could not remove the habit of reaching for a lightsaber that was no longer there.

Jude Watson

“What are you doing? You can’t stand by the window!” Dona moved forward quickly. She waved one thick, broad hand over a sensor and the armorweave curtains snapped shut. “I told you, the Imperials are sending seeker droids everywhere. They will send them even here, eventually, or sooner than that.” Dona tossed her waist-length gray braid behind her shoulder and moved around the room, smoothing a thermal blanket, moving a water pitcher from here to there, adjusting the tilt of a data screen. She was always moving, usually talking, and driving him crazy.

He was fond of her, though. He owed his life to her. He had made his way here, wounded, half out of his head with pain and exhaustion, and she had taken him in without question. She had hidden him and cared for him and would die for him, if she had to.

She had been his first client. He and Roan had started the business, and they had barely opened their doors when she’d walked in the door. She’d collected evidence against her employer for three months, as soon as she’d found out he was cutting corners on a vaccine for children that could be tainted. She was ready to take it to the authorities, but she knew she would not only be fired but could possibly be a target of assassination. Ferus and Roan had thought she’d been exaggerating, but they’d taken her on. She had been right. The government of her homeworld had been involved in the coverup as well as the corporation. They tried to discredit her, then they tried to arrest her, and finally, they tried to kill her. Roan and Ferus had spirited her away, found her a new identity, and she had testified against them in a galactic court. She had brought down a government as well as a corporation, and she still had enemies.

Dona was so resourceful that Ferus did not take credit for saving her life. She had taken the mountain cabin they’d found her and transformed it into a fortress. She had planted booby traps and devised her own surveillance techniques. He told her

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that she would have defeated them without the help of Olin/Lands. But he could not talk her out of her belief that he and Roan had saved her.

He heard the buzz of her conversation as static, then tuned back in. "...the trouble with the galaxy now, you can't trust anyone. At least before, you knew who you could trust and who you couldn't, at least most of the time. I should be the last one to say this, of course. I don't trust anybody. But now I *really* don't. So don't stand in front of the window, that's all I ask. Now, would you be wanting anything? I just made a pot of—"

Not more soup, Ferus thought. "No, thanks, Dona," he interrupted quickly, "I—" Ferus reached out to turn on what he thought was a switch for a glow lamp, and suddenly, the floor opened up. He slid down a chute and spilled out onto a stone floor, bumping his head in the process.

He looked up into the gloom. Dona looked down into the passage, squinting at him while he rubbed his head.

"Soup?" she asked.

Roan, I can't wait to tell you about this. Stay alive. Stay alive, so we can laugh again, Ferus begged in his head as he nodded.

Chapter Nine

Obi-Wan walked through the narrow streets of the area around Moonstone Lake, the most distant lake on the outskirts of town. Compared to the rest of Ussa, this was a grimy district. The streets were narrow and twined around one another in baffling patterns. The houses huddled together, and the pedestrians walked quickly, their eyes down. Obi-Wan was alert for movement from the shadowy alleys. He had gotten a crash course in how the black market operated from Wil and Rilla.

He kept his left hand free and held a disposable cup with steaming tea in it. He did not drink it, but held it. There were many tea stands in Ussa, and it was easily obtainable. All one had to do, Wil and Rilla assured him, was walk the streets of the Moonstone District holding a cup in the left hand. Sooner or later, he would be approached. It was a system that everyone knew, and so far, the Empire had not been able to crack it. The black market flourished in Ussa, something that infuriated the Imperial forces, Obi-Wan had been told.

“You see,” Wil had said, “they can have our government and our press and our factories. But they cannot have our loyalty. Their spies do not work here.”

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Rilla had nodded. "It is why they hate Ferus so much. No one will betray him, not for all the credits on Bellassa. It gives other planets hope."

It didn't take long for Obi-Wan to make contact. A young woman, her hair tucked under a dark cap, drifted close to him. "What are you looking for?"

"Clothing," he said.

She sighed in disappointment. "I have tech items...some functioning datapads, cloud car parts..."

"Not today, sorry."

"Then turn left into the next alley and whistle."

Obi-Wan followed her directions. The alley was dark, even though night had not fallen. He whistled softly.

After a moment, there was a rustling sound. A gravsled hummed forward, clothing tumbled in it in an array of colors and fabrics. It looked as if it had already been pawed through. Behind the controls was Trever. When he caught sight of Obi-Wan, the boy shook his head.

"Oh, no. Not you."

"Nice to see you again, too," Obi-Wan said. "I thought we had an agreement that you'd wait for me."

"I get itchy around stormtroopers. I'm funny that way."

"You owe me credits. And my cloak—I hope you haven't sold it. I paid you to wait."

Trever shifted his feet. "Look, I don't have the credits okay? I spent them already. You can take some clothing. I still think you'd look sharp in Ramordian silk. I think I've still got your cloak in here..." Trever began to dig through the garments. He came up with Obi-Wan's cloak and tossed it to him. "There. Now we're square, all right?"

"Not yet. I want an Imperial uniform."

"You told me to take them back to Mariana, remember?"

"But you didn't. They could be valuable. You would have kept those for yourself."

Jude Watson

Trever groaned. "I knew today was a no-moon day. Come on."

Obi-Wan followed the gravsled over the paving stones of the alley. Trever pushed through a battered metal door and motioned Obi-Wan through. Trever left the gravsled in a small foyer crowded with other battered repulsorlift vehicles, most of them stuffed with objects in various states of deterioration.

There was nowhere to go except through another battered door. Obi-Wan reached out to push it open, but Trever said, "Wait." He stepped forward and waved his hand over a battered, grimy sensor that Obi-Wan had assumed was broken.

In the old days, he would know better than to assume. Was he losing his Jedi awareness? Obi-Wan corrected himself. He had to have the same focus he always had. He could not let the days of isolation, the weeks and months of grief, dull his abilities.

The door clicked, and Trever pushed it open. Inside was one large room, taking up the entire first floor of the warehouse. It was crammed with contraband. Obi-Wan stopped, marveling. Household appliances, droids, computer parts, speeder parts, clothing, office equipment, and even one intact cloud car. The material was divided into separate piles. Men and women took items from various stacks and placed them on carts, or hid smaller items under their cloaks, then headed outside again. Some appeared to be shopping, followed closely by the sellers.

"How do they guard their own items?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Honor among thieves. Come on."

He led Obi-Wan to a far corner, A group of durasteel bins were neatly arranged in rows. He went directly to one in the back. He pulled out an Imperial uniform of a low-grade officer. But before handing it to Obi-Wan, he hesitated. "Don't tell me what you're going to do with this. And this is the last favor I do for you."

"Last favor. Promise." Obi-Wan took the uniform.

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“And don’t change into it here,” Trever advised. “You’ll start a panic. Everyone will think you’re here to arrest them.” He hesitated for a moment. “Is this about Ferus?”

“I thought you didn’t want to know.”

“Well, if you do find him, tell him...”

Obi-Wan waited. He saw the struggle on the boy’s face. He *did* care about Ferus.

“Tell him he stinks like a bantha,” Trever said in a rush.

“I’ll do that,” Obi-Wan promised, and headed for the door.

Chapter Ten

Once, long ago, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon had been walking through a torrential rainstorm. The rain had seemed to hit Obi-Wan in relentless sheets of water. He struggled with every step, while ahead of him his Master's broad back had moved steadily on. Obi-Wan had flinched from the onslaught, wiped the rain from his eyes so he could see, and slipped on the slick stones of the path they were following. Qui-Gon never even flinched.

He had struggled on for kilometers, hoping his Master had not noticed his difficulty. When at last they stopped to rest, Obi-Wan had leaned against the wall of the cave they had found for shelter. Everything was sodden—his cloak and hood, his pack, his boots. He felt he had been carrying stones in his pockets.

He still remembered Qui-Gon looking out at the rain cascading from a metallic sky. "You must own the rain, Obi-Wan. It must be part of you, an extension of you. If you fight it, it will win. Acceptance is the key to all difficulties."

He had been fourteen then. He had learned that lesson, and, like all of Qui-Gon's lessons, it had extended to so many things. Heat, wind, cold—he had learned how to accept them, not fight them.

Now he wore the uniform of an Imperial officer, and he owned it. His face was newly shaven, his expression impassive.

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He strode through the streets, and did not care that Bellassans shrank when they saw him, that they retreated before him like a toxic wind. For the time he would wear it, he would not shrink from the contact of it on his skin. He would not betray, by a look or a gesture, that he hated every fiber of it, for it represented everything he fought against.

The Imperial code cylinder got him into the front door of the garrison without trouble. That meant the owner had not reported it stolen. Still, he had to work fast. Obi-Wan strode down the hall. He knew the clones were ruthless and unimaginative. The Imperial officers were either brutes or opportunists, or both. They all carried themselves with the arrogant assurance that absolute power gave. They had all been a part of Emperor Palpatine's betrayal of the Jedi...but Obi-Wan had to block that out in order to make it through. He could not let anger or sadness seize him. Not now. Not ever.

No one stopped him or gave him a second look. The garrison was busy, with troops filing down the hallways and officers walking briskly, trying not to rush. The Empire had expanded its ranks, and he noted that many of the beings were not clones but crafty opportunists recruited from every corner of the galaxy. The stormtroopers were dressed in riot armor, carrying stun batons and blast shields. Was something afoot? Obi-Wan wasn't sure, but he wanted to be sure to get his information and get out before something happened.

He followed signs in Aurebesh for INTELLIGENCE UNIT/SECURITY and found an empty office. Obi-Wan quickly closed the door and, using the code cylinder, accessed the computer database. He entered the name ROAN LANDS.

Surveillance files popped up. Obi-Wan had been lucky. The cylinder must have belonged to a commander. He had high-level security clearance.

Intelligence breakthrough by paid operative indicates that Lands is a founding member of the Eleven along with Ferus Olin...considered dangerous to the goals of the Empire...

Jude Watson

Paid operative? A spy? Obi-Wan searched, but could find no further mention of the operative. Only a direction to the files of the Inquisitors. When he tried to access them, he was denied. His officer didn't have that high a clearance.

Subject left office, proceeded to Bluestone Lake district. Subject lost after entering large market.

Subject left home, proceeded to Gree Park. Subject lost among hiking trails.

"Good for you, Roan," Obi-Wan murmured. Roan Lands was obviously good at shaking the surveillance he'd known was behind him.

The file was a long one. He flipped through the hologram quickly. It ended with the arrest of Roan and Ferus. They had been surrounded by a full platoon, in the middle of the city, and had given themselves up rather than endanger the surrounding civilians. Obi-Wan could find no mention of charges. But then, the Imperials did not concern themselves with what they thought of as the petty rules of law.

Ah, the med record. Obi-Wan scrolled down to a section titled PERSUASIAN TECHNIQUES. His heart fell. Roan had been exposed to many neurotoxins. He had proven to be extraordinarily strong. Obi-Wan committed the drugs to memory, concentrating on those administered during Roan's last days in prison.

He could hear more footsteps in the hallways and could pick up the buzz of energy outside. He sensed that he wouldn't have much time left, but he owed it to the Eleven to find out as much as he could. As long as he could get inside the database, he had to keep looking.

He exited from Roan's file and browsed through directives to officers, most of them at the highest level of security clearance.

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ARREST SWEEPS. *Rotating neighborhoods To Be Determined. Any suspicious characters to be picked up. Targets to include: journalists, writers, artists, weapons experts, former army officers and soldiers...*

The title of a directive caught Obi-Wan's eye.

SCENARIOS FOR BODY DISPOSAL POST ORDER THIRTY-SEVEN.

Obi-Wan felt a chill. He accessed the file.

It is imperative that bodies not be released to family members...All HoloNet communication must shut down that morning and comm silence maintained for the next month so COMPNOR can control information outflow....No accounts to be disseminated as they can prove detrimental to Imperial control of surrounding systems....Proof of body disposal documented for Inquisitor Malorum to pass to LDV....

LDV...Lord Darth Vader?

Hundreds of bodies. They were planning for the disposal of hundreds of bodies. Obi-Wan frantically searched through the document, looking for clues. Who would be taken? When? He could find no information. It was as though the order had already been given....

The troops in the hallways. The sense he had of something about to happen....

Suddenly, Obi-Wan felt a surge of the dark side of the Force.

That meant that the full might of security would come crashing down on Obi-Wan's head within seconds.

He shut down the computer bank. Obi-Wan kept the cylinder in his palm and slipped out the door. A troop of officers was marching by, and he joined it. He was lost in a sea of uniforms. As they passed an equipment bin, he dropped the code cylinder in it. No one must know he had been here. No one must know he had seen that file.

He felt that Malorum was close.

Jude Watson

A clanging noise came over the speakers. A voice announced, "Order Thirty-Seven has begun. Please report to your stations. Repeat: Order Thirty-Seven has begun."

The hallways were suddenly flooded with stormtroopers. Obi-Wan was swept along in the tide.

He burst out of the garrison. He stayed with the troopers as they marched across the Commons and spilled into the streets, patrols splitting off from each other to cover more ground. A few people stopped to stare while others began to hurry, trying to outwalk the stomping boots.

An elder Bellasan stopped to watch the stormtroopers, concern on his face. To Obi-Wan's shock, a stormtrooper hit him with a stun baton. He fell, writhing, to the ground. The baton was set for a severe shock.

Obi-Wan started forward, but he knew he could not help. A woman stopped to try, and another stormtrooper hit her with the baton. She fell over the paralyzed man.

Holding pens with repulsorlift engines streamed from the garrison, piloted by more troopers. One after another they rumbled through the streets. As the stormtroopers moved through, striking down any pedestrian in their way, the carts picked up the bodies. Screams filled the air.

Rage and helplessness made Obi-Wan shake. There was nothing he could do. Never had he felt so alone. Once he could have done something, could have used his position as a Jedi to interfere, to call for reinforcements. Now he could only watch.

Cries rolled up from the streets, from the buildings, as entire families were taken. Anyone who protested was struck down. Children, elders, women, men.

Were these the bodies the file was talking about? Could the Empire truly do this? Could they assassinate so many for no reason? Or was there a reason? To crush Ferus and anyone like him.

Obi-Wan hurried through the streets. He had tracked an escape route back to the safe house of the Eleven. His uniform

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gave him cover from the troopers as well as the pedestrians he met. Frightened, they ran from him.

He couldn't wait to remove it. It felt as though it burned his skin.

After finding his Jedi robes where he'd hidden them, he circled around to the back of the safe house. The house had been chosen carefully with an eye for privacy. There were no windows, no doors overlooking the back entrance. Obi-Wan entered the code he'd been given and slipped through the gate. In a moment, Wil had opened the door to the house.

"We've heard the news. Mass arrests."

Obi-Wan took several breaths, trying to compose himself. "They are taking anyone in their way—"

Wil drew him in and closed the door. "I'm happy to see you are safe."

Obi-Wan still felt the drum of the marching feet, saw the anguished faces, the still-twitching bodies being tossed into the holding pens. "You should be worried for yourselves," he said.

A shadow of deep concern was on Wil's face, and Obi-Wan realized it wasn't for him. "What is it?"

"We have heard something. Ferus is in greater danger than we knew."

"What?"

"They haven't released the information that Roan has escaped, first of all. They want Ferus to think he's still being held. And we were contacted by several of the clients of Roan/Lands. Stormtroopers are visiting each of them, searching and in some cases destroying their houses. We can only assume that the Imperials have the secret list of the clients of Olin/Lands. We don't know how. If what we suspect is true—if Ferus is hiding with one of them..."

"It will not take them long to find him," Obi-Wan finished.

Chapter Eleven

Obi-Wan hurried into the interior room where Amie Antin sat with Roan.

“They used a combination of Loquasin and Titroxinate,” Obi-Wan said. He repeated the levels to the doctor. “Then, on the last day, they administered Skirtopanol.”

“It wasn’t a new drug. It was a new combination,” Dr. Antin breathed. “That explains his state now. But that combination...they must be mad.”

“They were desperate,” Obi-Wan said.

“This gives me what I need,” she said, already crossing to the med kit. “You two, go relax or something. I’ll find you if he wakes. I need quiet here.”

Obi-Wan trailed after Wil down the hall to the kitchen. The house was soundproof, but they all knew what was going on outside.

Wil put his head in his hands for a moment. “To go out there would be madness. To stay inside...it will drive me mad.”

“There is nothing we can do,” Obi-Wan said. “We can only wait for more opportune moments.”

Wil raised his head. His gray eyes were bleak. “Why now?” he asked softly. “There’s been no unrest, no battles. I don’t understand the mass arrests.”

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“Are your people safe?” Obi-Wan asked.

“The core group was all here for a meeting. And we moved our families out of the city long ago. I was able to get Amie’s son away, too. He’s safe. But there are many others, spread out all over the city....We won’t hear word until later.” He sat at the table, his hands gripping his blaster. “I don’t know where all of this will end.”

Obi-Wan didn’t know what to say. He had no answers. The galaxy was in the grip of a darkness that was vast and complete. The Sith had triumphed.

“I don’t believe they will rule forever,” he said finally.

Wil gestured toward some food, but Obi-Wan shook his head. Somehow it seemed wrong to take comfort in a warm kitchen, when outside the doors so much horror was taking place.

“No. And it will take more than we can possibly imagine to defeat them,” Wil said. “More than we think we are prepared to do. And yet I hope I’m still here to see it.”

Obi-Wan silently agreed. He thought of the children, Luke and Leia, growing up on separate planets. He hoped to see them as adults, committed to the fight. The thought of that lifted some of the helplessness he felt earlier—and also made him aware of the need to return to Luke soon.

Amie Antin appeared in the doorway. “He is awake.”

Obi-Wan rose quickly. “That was fast.”

“He is very strong. His mind is active, but his body will need time. At least a week before he can stand, I think. The drugs were powerful. Come. I can give you both a minute.”

Obi-Wan and Wil followed behind her. When they walked into the room, Roan was struggling to rise.

“Ferus,” he said.

“He isn’t here,” Wil said. “But we know he is safe.”

Gently, Amie pushed Roan back against the pillow. “You will be weak for some time. It is better that you stay flat.”

Roan obeyed her. His powerful body must have been fragile, for even Amie’s gentle touch sent him backward onto the sleep

Jude Watson

couch. The look he sent toward Obi-Wan brimmed with the strength his body didn't possess. "Who is this?"

"I am a friend of Ferus's from long ago," Obi-Wan said.

"You are a Jedi," Roan guessed.

"I came to help him, if I can."

"I have nothing to tell you."

Obi-Wan pushed a chair over and sat down. "I think you do," he said. "I think you know where he is."

Roan stirred restlessly. "I'll recover soon. If he needs help, I can give it."

"Dr. Antin thinks it will take you a week."

"Dr. Antin is wrong."

"She is an expert on neurotoxins."

"She's not an expert on me, though." Roan's mouth tilted, almost a grin.

"For the record," Amie broke in, "I'm never wrong."

"Are you willing to gamble on Ferus's life?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Roan, we need to know where he is," Wil said. "We have reason to believe that the Imperials are searching for him at the homes of all your old clients. They have a list."

"The list will do them no good," Roan said. "He is safe where he is. Forgive me, Wil, but Ferus and I took an oath. No one is to know. Not even the Eleven." His gaze was steadfast, but Obi-Wan suddenly saw the color drain from his face, and he closed his eyes.

"He needs rest," Amie said.

Wil started reluctantly for the door. Obi-Wan went with him, but paused at the door. "I just need another moment," he said in a low tone to Amie and Wil.

"Only a moment," Amie said.

"I know him," Wil said. "He will tell you nothing. Can you blame him? Somehow the Imperials found their case files. We could have a spy in the organization. We must investigate this."

Quietly, Wil and Amie left the room.

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"I think I know who you are," Roan said, without opening his eyes. "He had no secrets from me. You are the Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi, member of the Jedi High Council—former member, that is. He described you perfectly."

"How was that?"

"Tall and stubborn. And stiff."

"Stiff?"

"Stiff." Roan twisted in the bed and opened his eyes, his gaze suddenly penetrating. "The Jedi were wiped out, and yet you live. Why is that?"

"I was able to...avoid what happened."

Roan didn't drop his gaze. "How fortunate."

"What are you saying?"

"I've heard that some Jedi turned...they went to the dark side. How do I know you did not?"

"You don't," Obi-Wan said. "But the Ferus I knew had good instincts. Once, I did not listen to him, and I am sorrier about that than you'll ever know. He knew, better than I did, how to listen to instincts. If you know him well, you know that, too."

He saw that Roan was hesitating. Despite Roan's words, Obi-Wan saw that the young man was aware that he would not be able to leave his bed for some time.

"I will not tell the Eleven. I'll tell no one. You must trust me," Obi-Wan said. "Ferus trusted me once. I am the one to do this. The struggle for this planet could be mirrored on thousands of other planets. We need to make a decisive move now, to show that the Empire cannot destroy the people's will."

"Ferus and I had a pact—"

"And do you think he is keeping it? He thinks you're still in prison. Do you think he's going to stay away?"

Roan closed his eyes again. "No," he said softly. "He won't stay away."

"I can't give you facts. You must make this decision based on nothing but your feelings."

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“Now you sound like Ferus.” Roan gave a deep sigh, and looked up at the ceiling. Obi-Wan could see the struggle on his face. “He is in the mountain region of Arno,” he said. “I’ll give you the coordinates. Find him. He won’t admit it, but I’m sure he could use the help.”

He waited for nightfall. During the daytime, the streets were too dangerous. Rilla gave him new ID docs and arranged for a starfighter to transport him—something that required her to call in all of her favors. He would be a businessman from Raed-7. The Eleven didn’t know where he was going, but they would help him get there. They all agreed that until they knew if they’d been infiltrated, it was better to keep information safe.

“We still do much business with Raed-7,” she explained. “They are building a pipeline network outside the city. They will question you, but your papers are in order. If they thought you had no reason to be here, they might detain you at the spaceport.”

“This is the best way to leave Ussa,” Wil agreed. “I’m sure, after today, outlanders will want to leave the city. There will be others there for cover.”

Obi-Wan slipped the papers inside his traveling cloak.

“Safe journey,” Rilla said.

“Tell Ferus not to return,” Wil said. “If he is safe, then let him be safe. Tell him we will smuggle Roan out to him. He need not come back. He must know that Roan is safe.”

“I will find him,” Obi-Wan promised.

He walked to the spaceport. The streets were dark; the moon was covered with clouds. There were lights inside the buildings, but they were faint, as though the Bellassans inside were afraid to show too much evidence of their presence. Occasionally he would hear a patrol and melt back into a doorway or alley.

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When he reached the spaceport, Obi-Wan was surprised to see that it was bustling. Beings pressed toward the checkpoint, many with bundles and baggage.

An Imperial officer with a malicious expression walked to the front. "All Bellassans must return to their homes. No Bellassans will be allowed to leave the planet. Ussa is in lockdown. Outlanders may approach the checkpoint."

"But my wife is in the Anturus system!"

"I have exit papers from the Imperial government on Coruscant!"

The cries erupted from the crowd.

The officer and his soldiers drew their blaster rifles and aimed them straight at the crowd. "Return to your homes!"

Obi-Wan saw a woman next to him tremble. A man put his hand on his young son's shoulder. Slowly, the residents began to move back, shouldering their baggage and herding their children.

He could not imagine why they thought they could get out. But they were desperate and willing to try anything.

Obi-Wan saw a squad of men dressed in dark traveling clothes peel off from the few remaining beings at the checkpoint. He knew immediately they were Imperial spies, dressed to blend in. The Bellassans surging back toward the exit did not notice as the men slipped into their midst. They would follow them home. They would get their names. The Bellassans who tried to leave would go on a list, a list that would track them now as possible threats to the Empire.

"You there!" The officer pointed at him.

Obi-Wan stepped forward, holding out his ID docs. The officer jerked his head, pointing to the checkpoint. Obi-Wan handed over his ID docs.

He breathed evenly as the officer scrutinized them. He had to trust Rilla and Wil. It had been some time since he'd trusted anyone but himself.

"You've got the DP-x Explorer," the officer said. "Nice transport for a businessman."

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“Got it in the Raed-7 spaceport market sale after the end of the Clone Wars,” Obi-Wan replied, putting on a hearty voice. “What a sweet deal. Lots of beauties for sale back then. The pilots are dead—bad for them, good for me!”

“Right,” the officer said expressionlessly. “You can proceed.”

Obi-Wan walked off, tucking his ID docs back into his belt. He had only taken a few steps before he heard his name called.

“Ronar Hanare!”

He stopped and turned. It might have been a trick; he wasn’t sure. Sometimes beings could get through a checkpoint with false ID docs, then forget their fake name in the relief of having made it through. The officer would call out the name to see how quickly they would react...or not.

“You have to file a flight plan before you leave,” the officer said. His gaze was wary. Did he suspect something?

“Check,” Obi-Wan said.

He let out a slow breath as he walked to his cruiser, a pleasure craft that had been converted to deep space capability. He surveyed his surroundings without seeming to look, a Jedi technique. Nothing seemed amiss. He felt no surge of the Force, warning him. Another solitary man, large and prosperous looking, was conferring with his pilot. No doubt he was another businessman, anxious to escape the turbulent planet. A shorter figure in a dark flight suit, his back to Obi-Wan, was running through an engine check on a gray cruiser. Obi-Wan recognized it as a Firespray-class ship, a rare model that appeared to have been customized.

Obi-Wan climbed into his transport. He quickly keyed in a flight plan to Raed-7 and sent it to the control system. When approval for takeoff flashed back, he wasted no time, but shot up into the planet’s atmosphere.

He followed the flight plan up into space. He would make one orbit of the planet and then return to the atmosphere to get to the coordinates of Arno.

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He looked down at the tracking screen. A ship had taken off behind him. It was heading his way, but staying back, lurking. Odd. It had a cloaked identity. He turned, trying to make visual contact through the windscreen of the cockpit.

It was the Firespray attack ship. Someone was following him—someone, he suddenly realized, with a connection to his past.

Chapter Twelve

According to his flight plan, Obi-Wan was scheduled to jump to hyperspace. He decided to deviate slightly from that plan, and see what happened.

He stayed in realspace, plotting a lazy orbit around Bellassa. When the time came for his jump to hyperspace, he maintained cruising speed.

The Firespray ship increased speed. Obi-Wan followed suit.

The pilot must have customized the engine as well as the body of the craft.

Obi-Wan increased his speed to maximum. He was screaming across the sky now, and the ship just kept on coming. Soon, it would be within firing range. But surely he wouldn't be fired on...

An explosion rocked the ship. The controls were wrenched from his hands, and he nearly fell out of his chair. The Firespray had obviously customized weapons systems, too. Deadly ones. A proton torpedo had just detonated close to the ship.

Obi-Wan put his ship through evasive maneuvers as laser cannons sent streaks of deadly fire toward the ship. It had been so long since he'd done this, yet he had not forgotten anything—the feel of the controls, the knowledge of how far he could push the ship, the feeling in his stomach if a dive was too steep.

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The Firespray continued to blast him. These weren't warning shots. Whoever the pilot was, he wanted to bring Obi-Wan down.

Obi-Wan pushed the ship through more corkscrew turns and dives, but he knew it was only a matter of time before the Firespray scored a hit.

If Anakin were here, he'd be piloting. This was the kind of challenge he enjoyed.

The thought had risen unbidden. He could not seem to stop such thoughts. He was still in the habit of thinking of his apprentice, his friend. Anakin. Not who he became.

He didn't want to remember. It brought too much pain.

With a quick glance at the nav computer, he saw that he was near the remote mountain range of Arno. He didn't want to lead the pursuer there, but if he was successful they wouldn't know he had landed. Now he pushed the engines that extra bit he knew they could handle, until he was momentarily out of range of his pursuer. Then, he dived toward the surface. If his pursuer had him on his tracking computer, he would merely think Obi-Wan was trying to lose him in the mountains, where the sensors would have trouble getting a fix on him.

He had only a few seconds before the Firespray would track him down visually. Obi-Wan hugged the mountainside, zooming up and over and down into the valley, skimming so close that he could almost count the snow crystals on the peaks. The steep inclines and deep valleys created wind currents that buffeted the ship.

Ice had sought out the deep crevices in the rocks and glinted blue below him. Giant bridges made of ice appeared, and he zoomed through them. He held onto his speed, but it was making the craft hard to handle. He kept his eyes on the surface of the snow below.

At last he spotted what he was looking for—what was most likely a meadow in the summer was now a vast snowfield. How deep, he wasn't sure—he was getting a variety of readings,

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meaning that drifts had formed. In some places the snow was fifty meters deep. He looked carefully at the surface. He could see no skin of ice, which meant he would not leave evidence of his landing. Yet the snow had to be packed hard enough for the ship to settle without sinking too far. He hoped.

Holding his breath, Obi-Wan aimed the ship straight down at top speed and then cut the power. The ship sailed with what seemed like great gentleness toward the bed of snow.

Then it hit. Obi-Wan's head jerked back with the impact. Sound seemed to be sucked into the snow itself. He heard the snow above fall with a whoosh down on the top of the cockpit. The whiteness surrounded him.

The ship settled down, the snow cascading, falling all around him. It was like being buried alive. The ship settled a few more meters, then stopped.

It was dark, but there was a curious quality to the light, slightly luminous despite the gloom. He saw his breath cloud the air. He waited. He would have to use his senses, not his instruments.

He called on the Force. His awareness moved up through the molecules of snow, through the spaces between the molecules, up into the thin air above. He could hear it or sense it—he wasn't sure, but he knew the Firespray was there, searching for him, flying back and forth over the mountains, dipping into the snow meadows and up again, buzzing like a frustrated insect.

After a time he felt the vacuum of its leaving. The Force smoothed out. He was alone.

Obi-Wan gazed outside the cockpit. He would not be able to take off from here. Even this ship, powerful as it was, would not be able to blast out against the snow. He would have to crawl out. He activated the canopy control. It struggled against the snow but did not rise. He took a deep breath and let it out. He would not allow himself to consider the possibility that he was trapped.

He put on his thermal cape and strapped on his survival pack. Then he took out his lightsaber and cut a hole in the canopy.

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Snow tumbled in, but he was able to crawl out. His landing had created a small bubble here, enough to breathe. He shoved a hand in the snow and tried to grab it. It would not hold him.

He tried to remember what was above. He reached for the grapnel line on his utility belt. It had a recoiling action, so he could shoot a filament above, but the claw end had to bite into something. He cleared a space above with his lightsaber, then shot the cable up at an angle, trying to pinpoint where he remembered seeing a small cluster of rocks.

The cable failed and recoiled back into the grapnel gun. He tried again. The recoiling action pulled the line back.

Again and again Obi-Wan shot the cable up into the air. The snow was starting to melt due to his body warmth and the fading warmth of the ship. Chunks of it collapsed on top of him. If he kept this up, he would start an avalanche above himself—small, but enough to bury him for good.

He shot it up again. This time, it held. He tested it. It had to work. He activated the mechanism, and the cable retracted, pulling him up through the snow. It got in his hair and his eyes and his mouth, but he did not stop moving.

He broke through to the surface and said hello to a gray sky. Obi-Wan lay flat on the snow. He pressed the mechanism and the filament recoiled. He tucked the grapnel line back into his belt. Then he rose slowly, gazing in awe at the vast mountains below and above him.

He dusted the snow off his tunic and started to walk.

Night was falling on the second day as he scaled the last cliff toward the coordinates Roan had given him. He had taken the most direct route, which meant much of the time he was making his way vertically, up cliff-sides and scaling huge boulders. He was exhausted and cold. His thermal cape was stiff with ice. Ice crystals had formed on his growing beard and eyelashes. But he was determined to finish his journey tonight.

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At last he saw it—a small white stone cabin blending in with the snow. Relieved, he walked toward it.

A voice came from behind him. It was female, crisp.

“You’ve got a blaster rifle pointed at your back. Don’t move.”

“I’m a friend.”

“I don’t have friends.”

“Roan sent me.”

“Never heard of him.”

He heard the unmistakable sound of a rifle being lifted to a shoulder. His hand went to his lightsaber.

The door to the cabin opened.

“Dona, don’t shoot,” Ferus said after a long pause. “I’m afraid my friend will take it very personally if you do.”

Chapter Thirteen

Obi-Wan walked forward. The sight of Ferus struck him as slightly unreal.

“I thought you were dead,” Ferus said.

“Perhaps I was,” Obi-Wan responded.

To Obi-Wan’s surprise, Ferus moved forward and embraced him. Ferus, who had always been so proper. It had been so long since Obi-Wan had felt an emotion like this that he feared he would be overwhelmed. He swallowed and hugged Ferus back. The rush of feeling felt like spring water down a parched throat. Ferus was alive, and that meant that the past had not died. Not completely.

Ferus stepped back and grinned. “And I thought I was immune to surprises.” He turned to Dona. “So, what do you say? Do you think we should invite him in? You’re the boss.”

The woman didn’t smile, but Obi-Wan could see that she enjoyed Ferus’s teasing. “Looks like he could use a thawing out,” she said. “Just don’t get puddles on my floor.”

“I’ll tell you one thing,” Ferus said in an undertone to Obi-Wan. “I know there’ll be soup.”

Ferus drew him into the warmth of the house. Now that they were in the light, Obi-Wan could see the changes in him. He was leaner, more muscled. His face had matured; its angles were

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sharper. He was still only in his early twenties, but the wide gold streak in his dark hair had turned to silver. He gave the impression of a man who had been through things he would not want to talk about.

But there was a looseness to him, too, which was new. Even his walk was different. Once, Ferus had moved with the rigid assurance that came with a disciplined mind. Now he hooked a chair with his foot and dragged it in front of the fire and waved Obi-Wan toward it. The old Ferus would never have done something so casual, and so...graceful. And Obi-Wan had never heard Ferus joke before. He had changed in ways Obi-Wan had yet to discover.

"You're staring," Ferus said.

"I'm sorry, it's that you seem so different."

"You, too. You've gone completely gray. You look older. In fact, you don't look all that well."

"Thanks."

As soon as Obi-Wan's wet things were whisked away by Dona, and he was sitting in front of the warm fire, Ferus allowed his anxiety to show.

"You said that Roan sent you," Ferus said.

"He is fine," Obi-Wan said. "He was smuggled out of the med clinic and taken to the Eleven. He was...given some neurotoxins while in prison."

Ferus nodded grimly.

"But we were able to discover what they were, and he's awake now. Getting stronger by the minute. He asked me to tell you not to return to Ussa. There were mass arrests the day I left. It isn't safe there."

Ferus sighed and sank into a chair opposite Obi-Wan. "I hate the Empire. And I hate this exile."

"You can't stay here," Obi-Wan said. "The Imperials are checking your list of clients. Roan thinks you are safe, but I'm not sure...."

"Dona isn't on the list on our computer files."

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"I was followed from Ussa. I don't know why or by whom. I don't know if it has anything to do with you, but we can't take any chances."

Ferus nodded, frowning. "Where is your transport?"

"Buried under a snowbank."

"Dona has tools, we can get it out. You're right—I should leave. Events have changed things. I'll have to get back in contact with the Eleven. We'll have to wait a bit longer for our chance, but we should be making plans."

Obi-Wan held out a hand for the bowl Dona brought to him. His cold fingers curled around the heat. He had forgotten this, too—how warmth and safety felt after an impossible journey. "Just what do you expect to accomplish?"

"I expect to overthrow the Empire, one planet at a time," Ferus answered. "Nothing less than that."

As Ferus eased himself back into the chair, Obi-Wan could see that he was still in pain.

"It's nothing," Ferus said, seeing Obi-Wan glance at his leg. "I was wounded in the escape. Caught a bit of blasterfire. Dona's been treating it, and it's almost healed."

"I'm sensing something that surprises me," Obi-Wan said slowly. "I would not expect that life outside the Jedi Order would suit you."

"I would have said the same," Ferus said with a laugh. "But I adjusted. Siri used to always tell me that I must accept change. Welcome it, she said—change is what keeps the galaxy spinning. It's what makes it beautiful." Ferus looked into the fire. "I heard about her death, before all the others. I'm sorry, Obi-Wan."

"There were so many deaths," Obi-Wan said. Ferus didn't know, but Obi-Wan missed Siri constantly and intensely, even still.

"I'm sorry, I have to ask, Obi-Wan—Anakin. He didn't survive either?"

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Obi-Wan couldn't tell him. He would tell a version of the truth. "He didn't survive." The Anakin they both knew was dead. "He was hunted down by the Empire."

Ferus nodded, pain in his gaze, even though he and Anakin had been rivals more than friends. "I had thought that leaving the Jedi would be the most terrible occurrence of my life," he said. "It turns out to have saved my life. I was not among those caught at the Temple, or on another planet. I wasn't hunted down. But hearing about all that...it was hard to bear. Betrayal. And seeing the galaxy in the grip of the Emperor—that is something that eats at me. What could we have done, what could we have seen?"

"We do not look back. We take each moment."

Ferus stretched out his legs. "Ah yes, so the Jedi say. So where have you been for the past year or so?"

"Here and there," Obi-Wan said. He trusted Ferus, but he would not tell him about Luke and Leia. The more a secret was told, the less a secret it became.

"Ah, I won't ask," Ferus said. "I'm just glad to see you. Do you know if any other Jedi have survived?"

Obi-Wan hesitated. The fact that Yoda was still alive was another secret. "I know of only one for sure, who I cannot mention," he said. "There might be some who have gone underground. There's no way to tell. There was a beacon calling Jedi back to the Temple, to be slaughtered. We managed to replace it with a signal saying to stay away—but at that point, it may have been too late. There may not be any others left."

Ferus leaned forward, forearms on his knees, hands clasped. "I find that hard to believe. There's got to be a way to find them. The Jedi were too powerful to be completely wiped out. There must be others who survived, just as you did. I think of that question. It haunts me."

Obi-Wan shook his head. "I'm sorry, Ferus. It is impossible to believe, but you must believe it. The Jedi are gone."

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The firelight glinted in Ferus's dark gaze, licking it with orange. "I will never believe it," he said. "And now that you're here, we can do something about it."

Obi-Wan was already shaking his head. "I have my own task to fulfill. I will help you now, but then I must leave and never return."

"You can't mean that."

"I do."

"But there is so much to fight for."

"My days of fighting are over, for now."

"What can be more important?"

Obi-Wan didn't answer.

"I don't like having to question a Jedi Master," Ferus said. "Old habits die hard. But are you kidding me? You'd rather hide than fight?"

The words and the manner shocked Obi-Wan. He kept silent in disapproval.

"Now don't get all Jedi-proper on me," Ferus said. "I can see it on your face. I'm not your apprentice, Obi-Wan. You deserve my respect, of course. But I've learned to speak frankly. This is a new reality, a new galaxy."

"We fought and died in the new galaxy," Obi-Wan said, feeling a prick of irritation.

"I know that," Ferus said. "What I meant is that the galaxy has changed. To choose exile over engagement dooms us all to domination and despair."

"Ferus, I'm not one of the Eleven," Obi-Wan said. "I'm an old friend. I didn't come here to be recruited."

"So what is your answer to the Empire?"

Obi-Wan looked into the fire. He could feel the word on his lips, but he didn't want to say it. He knew it would infuriate Ferus. "Wait."

"Wait?"

Ferus looked as though he wanted to leap out of the chair and throttle Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan held his gaze steadily. The galaxy

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may have been different, but he still knew how to subdue a turbulent apprentice.

Ferus suddenly smiled and leaned back against the cushion Dona had placed behind him. "I remember when that look used to scare me. It almost scares me now. *Almost*, Obi-Wan."

Ferus spoke so amiably that Obi-Wan felt his irritation drain away. Of course Ferus wouldn't understand his decision.

Obi-Wan sipped his soup. "There is something else I must tell you," he said. "There is an Imperial security officer, an Inquisitor named Malorum—"

"Yes, I've met him," Ferus said. "He was there for the interrogations, though he didn't speak."

"He has a Force connection."

Ferus nodded slowly. "I suspected that...I wasn't sure. It's been so long since I've used the Force. It's still part of me, but I don't access it."

"Do you know anything about him?"

"I know he's distinguished himself at the highest level," Ferus said. "He's said to be Lord Vader's special pet. He can choose his own assignments."

"He is very interested in capturing you, that much I know," Obi-Wan said.

"Well, he'll just have to be disappointed," Ferus said. "I don't intend to revisit an Imperial jail cell again." He picked up his spoon. "Now, I suggest we do as the Jedi do..."

Obi-Wan smiled. "When food arrives, eat."

Obi-Wan thought he would have trouble sleeping, but the rest his body craved overtook him. Wrapped in Dona's hand-loomed blankets, he fell asleep by the warmth of the fire.

In the morning, Obi-Wan had a glimpse through the window of an impossibly wide blue sky, white-capped mountains in the distance.

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“Dona doesn’t like me to open the armorweave curtains, but over here we can’t be seen on the mountainside,” Ferus said, once Obi-Wan was up. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you,” Obi-Wan said. He thought it strange to be having such an ordinary conversation, guest to host, under these circumstances. It felt so normal, when the situation was anything but normal. Obi-Wan still wasn’t used to the new position he found himself in. Ferus was no longer a Padawan. Every rule that had bound them together was gone.

Dona hurried into the kitchen, clutching her morning robe to her throat. “There is news,” she said. “I was able to access the HoloNet.”

Ferus snorted. “We can’t believe anything we hear on that. It’s controlled by the Empire.”

“I’m afraid this is all too true,” Dona said. “The mass arrests in Ussa...the Empire has issued an ultimatum. If the city does not give up Ferus Olin within twenty-four hours, everyone held in the mass arrest will be executed. The order came down six hours ago.”

The color faded from Ferus’s face. His body went rigid.

“So that was why they did it,” Obi-Wan said. “They arrested so many in order to catch only one.”

“I have to go back,” Ferus said. “I have to give myself up.”

Chapter Fourteen

He didn't have a choice. If he didn't do it, innocent people would die. Even as he got up from the table, Ferus frantically began to calculate how long it would take him to get to Ussa. Dona didn't have a cruiser capable of going that far, but she had a friend in the village...

"Wait," Obi-Wan said, putting a hand on his arm.

All of Ferus's fury at the Empire funneled down into the man standing before him, blocking his way.

"Is that all you can do—wait? I have to leave now!" Ferus couldn't believe that Obi-Wan was the same Jedi he once knew. He remembered Obi-Wan as cautious, but this was ridiculous.

"I just mean you should consider how you return," Obi-Wan began. "There might be a way to—"

A soft alarm suddenly rang on the databoard in Dona's kitchen. "Penetration," she said. "Someone is in the airspace. Let me survey—"

An explosion sent debris raining down on them while a wall of air sent them flying. Ferus sailed backward in what seemed like slow motion, riding a cushion of air. He landed hard on the kitchen floor, his head banging on the counter behind him. He saw the table flying toward him, and he knew with a cold certainty he was able to grasp in less than a second that it would

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fall on his injured leg. He reached out for the Force, but it was a blind, instinctive gesture without any power behind it. He could feel the Force, but not access it.

To his surprise, the table flew across the room. He saw Obi-Wan had Force-pushed it even as he himself hit the floor. It fell inside the small crater where once there had been a hand-hooked rug.

Above his head he could see blue sky. The assault had punched a hole in the reinforced roof.

Obi-Wan was already moving, glancing through the window as Dona waved a frantic hand over the sensor for the armorweave curtains.

"It's the Firespray that tailed me from Ussa."

Ferus gently grabbed Dona's hand. "It's too late," he said. "I don't think the curtains are going to stop this."

She looked up at the space where most of the roof had been. "Of course."

"Do you have a transport?" Obi-Wan asked her.

"Nothing that can outrun that," Dona said.

"And we have no cover if we run," Obi-Wan said.

"We don't have to run," Dona said. "The house can withstand attack for a time, but we'd better not stay. This way."

It was then that the door blew open in a blast that sent them all diving for cover.

Behind an overturned chair, Ferus peered toward the door. A creature blocked out the light from outside. It was a cyborg, its body covered in armor. But there was a laser cannon where the head should have been. It aimed directly at him. He saw the red targeting light pulse.

So there were two of them. One in the air, one on the ground. This was definitely not good news.

Obi-Wan was a blur of movement, his lightsaber a slashing glow. He barreled forward, aiming for the being's head. The being had to step away, ruining his aim. The laser cannon

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boomed, but it missed Ferus and thudded into the kitchen sink. Water shot into the air, and flames erupted.

“Go!” Obi-Wan shouted.

Ferus helped Dona to rise. Together they rushed from the kitchen. Even as he moved to bring Dona to safety, Ferus’s mind worked furiously. He couldn’t leave Obi-Wan.

Ferus raced to a hidden compartment in the hallway wall. He knew where all the weaponry was concealed in the house. He slung a blaster rifle over his arm and loaded his pockets with C16 grenades. He tossed Dona a few, and she tucked them in her belt. He knew she always had a blaster strapped to her ribs. He slid out an electrojabber and held it by his side as he hurried her along down the hall, blasterfire ripping through the roof over their heads and blasting through the floorboards.

Dona reached the trapdoor hidden in the floor and pressed the release. Ferus helped her inside the opening. “Go,” he said. “Get to the village. They don’t want you. Only me.”

“I can’t leave you.”

He took both of her hands in his as the house shuddered with the impact of another laser cannon blast. “You have done enough. More than enough. I’ll never forget it. Plus, this house is about to be destroyed. Now get out of here.”

She let go of his hands and slid down the ramp.

Ferus raced back to the kitchen. In a glance, he saw that Obi-Wan had succeeded in keeping the intruder trapped in the doorway. The intruder, meanwhile, had succeeded in destroying the kitchen. Fire blazed along one wall, and the other was partially demolished. Obi-Wan was busy avoiding the strafing fire from the attacking ship above and the pounding of the laser cannon on the creature’s head.

Ferus used the electrojabber like a javelin, and threw it. It smashed into the creature’s chest and stayed there. Although the cyborg was armored, the force of the blow sent it staggering backward and paralyzed it momentarily. It crashed to its knees.

“This way!” Ferus shouted to Obi-Wan.

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He had left the trapdoor open. Obi-Wan sailed in and slid down the ramp. Ferus followed, hitting the control as he went. The trapdoor slid smoothly shut after them.

Sound became muffled as they slid down to the floor and got to their feet.

“There’s an entrance to the old mining tunnels we can access down here.”

“Where’s Dona?” Obi-Wan asked.

“I sent her ahead to the village. We’d better not go that way. If they do manage to find the tunnels, we should lead them away from her.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Let’s get moving.”

Ferus put his hand on what appeared to be sheer rock. The sensor was exactly where Dona had showed him. The hidden door opened smoothly, and they stepped inside.

“These used to be mutonium mines, before the mineral ran out. There’s a maze of tunnels all through the mountains. Dona explored them when she first arrived here—she knows them like the back of her hand. She gave me a lesson on direction a couple of days after I arrived, in case I had to escape alone. I have a general idea of how to get to the other side of the mountain. Maybe they won’t figure out how to get down here.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Obi-Wan said. “Lead on.”

Ferus started down the tunnel. The miners had blasted through rock to form the tunnels, and they were reinforced with large durasteel beams that served as supports. The glow lamps no longer worked, but Ferus’s eyes adjusted quickly, and they were able to move faster.

“Do you think they followed you here?”

“No,” Obi-Wan said. “No one tailed me from the landing spot. They found you another way. The cyborg with the laser cannon for a head—”

“Handsome creature. Charming way to introduce oneself. Why knock when you can blast a door down?”

“—any ideas on who sent him?”

Jude Watson

"I heard a rumor in prison, that Malorum had a team of bounty hunters working for him. One was called D'harhan, a cyborg that was more like a walking assault weapon. Must be him. I never heard about a Firespray."

But Obi-Wan had an idea about the second one...

"I wish I knew what was happening up there," Obi-Wan said, with a glance up at the tunnel ceiling.

"Once you closed the door to the mines behind you, it activated a warning. The next one who tries to open it will detonate a small explosive charge," Ferus explained as he hurried down the tunnel. "We should be able to hear it down here. Then we'll know they found the tunnel."

Ferus's heart was pounding, but it wasn't the aftermath of the assault. All he could think of was the citizens of Ussa slated for execution. "Every minute I spend down here is a minute I'm not traveling to Ussa. The executions are scheduled to start in less than a day."

"You must focus on the present moment," Obi-Wan said. "Not on what *might* happen."

"Obi-Wan, I'm warning you," Ferus said. "If you keep sounding like a Jedi Code doc, we are really not going to get along."

"So, what are we looking for?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Water. I know there's an exit by an underground lake."

They kept on going, pressing on. Suddenly, they heard a muffled thump.

"I guess they found the door," Ferus muttered.

They quickened their pace, almost running now.

Ferus doubted the explosion had stopped them. Although it would be a nice bonus if it had blown that laser cannon into a few choice pieces of scrap.

"Even if they survived that blast, there's no way they can find us," Ferus finally said. "The tunnels are a maze, and they'll get lost. *I'm* lost. There's no way they—"

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They heard the whistle of the rocket behind them. They dived to the floor as it zoomed overhead and thudded into the rock. The ceiling tilted, and rocks rained down, but the tunnel did not collapse.

“You were saying?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Who *are* those guys?” Ferus asked, coughing out the grit from his lungs, and they started to run.

Chapter Fifteen

The smaller one wore armor, a helmet, and wrist and knee rockets. Obi-Wan could deflect the blaster fire with his lightsaber, but that meant he had to keep turning, and the only thing that could protect them from the laser cannon was running. Luckily, their pursuers had to be somewhat careful. Too much cannonfire could bring down the tunnel on all of them.

He hadn't used his lightsaber in so many long months. Yet it felt perfectly balanced in his hand, and his movements were quick and graceful. He was able to run and twist to deflect fire, able to leap and whirl, his lightsaber in a controlled arc of movement, and not have to think about how to accomplish it. He was fighting like a Jedi again.

Ferus ran fast, but Obi-Wan could detect a slight hitch in his stride, proof that his leg was not healed enough to keep up a constant pace. They needed to lose their pursuers, not outrun them.

"Do you smell it?" Ferus said over the sound of blasterfire. "Water."

"We can't go straight toward it," Obi-Wan said, swinging his lightsaber. "We need to get a head start."

"One or two of these side tunnels must come out there, too," Ferus said. "It's just a question of choosing the right one."

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Obi-Wan accessed the Force. The smell of water, of damp, was faint. He was surprised Ferus had picked it up, but he could also sense the stirring of the Force in him. Even as he ran and kept his lightsaber whirling, he concentrated on the smell until it filled a part of his consciousness so completely that he could track it. “Third tunnel on the left up ahead,” he said. “After the curve. Let’s try a diversion.”

Ferus tossed a grenade backward with a spinning accuracy that impressed Obi-Wan. He had timed it to fall short, but the two attackers didn’t know that. The grenade hit, blowing a large hole in the hard-packed floor and sending the younger bounty hunter flying backward. The cyborg was stronger and absorbed the blow, but lurched forward and fell into the hole.

Smoke and dirt particles filled the tunnel. Ferus and Obi-Wan used it as cover to make a dash for the side tunnel. They moved off silently down the narrower passage. They could just make out the sound of their pursuers racing down the main tunnel. They had lost them—for now.

The dark, narrow tunnel had deteriorated over the years. They waded through puddles of water and had to step over fallen beams. The blackness was complete. It was as though they’d been buried in the heart of the mountain. But at least they weren’t dodging laser fire.

The smell of damp grew stronger. At last Obi-Wan saw a glimmer ahead. The lake.

They emerged into a huge, arching cavern of dark red stone. Towering needles of rock surrounded them like a forest. A lake with water as black as oil lapped at the smooth stone of the floor. Across the lake they could see the continuation of the tunnel, its entrance partially blocked with fallen supports.

“The good news is that we found it,” Ferus said. “The bad news is that we have to swim across it.”

Obi-Wan handed Ferus an aquata rebreather. “We’ll have to share this. We’ll have to stay underwater to avoid detection. By

Jude Watson

the looks of that water, we won't be able to see a thing. Do you think you can access the Force?"

Ferus shook his head. "I've been trying, but..."

Obi-Wan reached into his belt and withdrew the grapnel line. He let out a short length of the strong filament and hooked the claw into Ferus's belt. "Hang onto this, then."

The water was shockingly cold. Obi-Wan slipped under the surface. He felt his skin shrink from the terrible cold. He hoped Ferus could make it. Water this cold could cause cramping or paralysis. Without the Force to help him, Ferus might have trouble swimming.

He began to stroke across the lake, feeling the occasional tug of the cable line that meant Ferus was swimming behind him. Occasionally Ferus would tug the line and pass the rebreather up to Obi-Wan. He dived as deep as he dared, not wanting even a ripple to announce their presence underneath the water.

Midway across the lake he felt the cable line grow taut. He turned, barely able to make out the shadow that was Ferus behind him.

Ferus was in trouble. The combination of the cold and his injury was making it difficult for him to swim. He was struggling, and Obi-Wan could see the effort it cost him.

He reached under Ferus's arms and began to stroke with one hand, pulling Ferus along through the water. The effort was exhausting. He reached out to the Force, gathering it from the water and the rocks and the air above. He wanted to ride it like a wave to the safety of the opposite shore. He didn't want to take the aquata rebreather from Ferus; he could feel Ferus struggling for breath. But he couldn't hold out much longer without it.

Then Obi-Wan felt a surprising thing. The Force was meeting the Force, a weak attempt, to be sure, but Ferus was accessing it, nurturing it, trying to use it to join with Obi-Wan. Perhaps it helped him to have their bodies joined together, for Obi-Wan felt the Force grow. And then the Force was pulsing between them and around them, binding them together, the two of them,

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and making them one with the molecules of water in the lake so that they slipped through the water with ease.

Obi-Wan looked over at Ferus. He nodded at Obi-Wan, pleased at what had happened, even amid the freezing water and the danger. He had found the Force again. He handed Obi-Wan the rebreather and they began to share it again.

Soon Obi-Wan could feel, rather than see, that they were close to the other side. Now they would have to take the chance and expose themselves. There was enough light for their pursuers to see them if they were looking in this direction. They would have to do this silently.

Obi-Wan rose from the lake, just his head above the surface. He saw the two bounty hunters immediately. Their backs were to the lake, and they were circling, trying to discover where Obi-Wan and Ferus had gone.

Obi-Wan's memory pricked. He knew the smaller one. Something about the way he carried himself...His helmet obscured his face, but he was familiar to Obi-Wan. He studied his armor. It was green Mandalorian battle armor, and those were Kelvarek rocket systems on his wrist guards.

He looked like a smaller version of Jango Fett. But Jango Fett was dead.

But he had a son...a clone. Boba.

Boba must not see him. He would recognize him. He had met Boba when he was just a boy, on Kamino, but Obi-Wan could still feel the flat stare of the boy, how it seemed to take all of him in. And after the battle on Geonosis, when he had seen his father cut down by Mace Windu, no doubt the Jedi were no friends of this boy. How old could he be now? Thirteen, fourteen? Just a boy, but more than a boy. Another orphan of the Clone Wars, another boy taking on adulthood too soon.

He remembered Jango Fett's ship—it had been a Firespray. Retrofitted with increased weaponry, speed, targeting systems. It had been repainted.

Jude Watson

All these thoughts raced through Obi-Wan's mind even as he nudged Ferus, who came up silently. They moved through the water, walking now, pushing gently against the water but not letting even the tiniest splash sound.

They were almost to the entrance of the tunnel when they were spotted. The laser cannon boomed. Cannonfire sprayed the water, sending them diving below the surface again, trying to keep their bodies under the shallow water.

Obi-Wan heard the *boom* as cannonfire hit the tunnel supports. The water rolled back, a wave that swept them into deeper water. The time to make their move was now, before they were trapped underwater while Boba Fett made his way toward them. They had to run for it.

Ferus was right with him. They did not need to look at each other or signal each other. They were of one mind now, one purpose.

Ferus burst through the surface of the water at the same time as Obi-Wan, and charged through the knee-deep water. Behind them, Boba Fett activated his jetpack. He rose into the air toward them.

Using the Force, Obi-Wan created a wave behind them. He reached out to every molecule of water, calling on the Force to bind them into a giant, cresting black wave. He felt Ferus join the effort, and the power of the wave picked them up and hurled them forward toward the tunnel.

The tunnel was now almost completely collapsed, two durasteel columns knocked down, forming a cross that blocked the opening. Dirt and rocks were now falling from the ceiling to create more obstacles.

Boba Fett set off a concussion missile, aiming for the tunnel entrance. The impact was tremendous. The other support started to fall, the ceiling partially caving in.

Obi-Wan and Ferus careened through, carried by the cresting wave. They swam through the remaining space of the collapsing

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tunnel as the entrance smashed to the ground behind them, sealing them inside.

Obi-Wan's face slammed into the muddy ground, and he tasted lake water, dirt, and metallic rock in his mouth. He felt dirt thud onto his back and hoped he wouldn't be buried alive.

The noise stopped. Slowly, he rolled over, the dirt and rocks cascading off him.

"Ferus?"

Ferus's eyes were closed. His face was streaked with dirt, his cheek against the rock. Obi-Wan put a hand on his arm. "Ferus!"

His eyes opened. "That was...quite a ride," he managed to get out.

"Come on. Even a blocked tunnel won't stop those two. I recognized the other one. Boba Fett, a bounty hunter. He's just a kid, maybe fourteen or fifteen."

"Some kid," Ferus said, wincing as he got to his feet.

"Which way?"

"I'm not sure...to the left, I think."

They stumbled on. They'd gone less than a hundred meters when they heard another *boom*.

"They're not trying to chase us," Ferus said. "They're going to collapse the tunnel."

They might well succeed. Obi-Wan saw the durasteel supports shake. Rocks tumbled down onto the path. The ground shook.

Behind them, the tunnel caved in. Over their heads, the supports groaned.

"Run!" Ferus shouted.

They ran, speeding down the tunnel as the beams cracked overhead and supports began to topple.

Ahead, they saw a flash of color. It was Dona, still dressed in her morning robe, violet as the snow at twilight. Her gray hair streamed down her back.

"Hurry!" she called. "This way!"

"What are you doing?" Ferus asked her, as they ran up. "I told you we could take care of this."

Jude Watson

“And you’re doing so well,” she replied.

Another explosion rocked the tunnel. The durasteel support behind them crashed to the ground. Obi-Wan grabbed Dona and Force-leaped, Ferus right beside him. They landed in the next tunnel while the rocks and dirt rained behind them.

“This tunnel isn’t going to last much longer,” Dona said. “Come on.”

With Dona to direct them, they were able to race along the tunnels faster than before. The ground shook with every explosion, but she quickly led them down a side tunnel to a lift tube with an open cage.

“Does it work?” Ferus asked.

“Sure hope so. Get in.” Dona jumped in and flipped the lever. As the cage rose smoothly, she grinned. “Only kidding. I keep this one running, just in case.”

The hum of the machinery was reassuring. Obi-Wan looked down, glad to leave the tunnels below. The lift rocketed to the surface, shaking with each new blast.

Dona led them out of the tube into a small structure built into the rock of the mountain. They walked out into bright sunshine. They were high above the village here.

“We’ll hike down the mountain to the village. I’ve got a friend with a fast speeder. It will get you to Ussa.”

“We have less than sixteen hours,” Ferus said.

Chapter Sixteen

It took more time than the impatient Ferus could bear, but at last they were in the two-seat speeder, streaking toward Ussa. There was no sign of Boba Fett and his lethal companion. But Obi-Wan knew he would have to make things right here—and then return as stealthily as possible to Tatooine.

“I have to warn you,” Obi-Wan now said to Ferus, “you may give yourself up, but there’s no guarantee that Malorum will free the prisoners. I’m afraid it might be just the opposite.”

“What do you mean? They can’t go back on a deal.”

“They can do whatever they like,” Obi-Wan said quietly. “Surely you know that by now. They are perfectly capable of executing every prisoner. Including you. They know they need to strike fear into the hearts of every person in Ussa. They want to destroy you, and they want to destroy the spirit of the citizens. Giving yourself up won’t save them. I saw a file in the garrison. It dealt with...how to hide a great number of deaths. Dispose of bodies.”

Ferus looked horrified. “They can’t murder all of them.”

“Ferus, the extent of their evil is greater than you know,” Obi-Wan said. “The evil begins at the top and trickles down. Emperor Palpatine is a Sith Lord.”

Jude Watson

"A Sith?" Ferus looked at him, shocked. The knowledge clicked in behind his eyes. "The Sith we were tracking...my last mission on Korriban..."

"Yes, but keep this to yourself. It was Count Dooku who Granta Omega was meeting. That's why, when Omega died, he told me I would wish I knew what he knew. About the identity of the Sith Lord."

Ferus was silent for some time. "So he planned this for some time. And Darth Vader..."

"Is his apprentice." Obi-Wan felt a spasm of pain. He didn't know if he would reveal Vader's identity to Ferus. There was no need for him to know.

"The Sith control the galaxy," Ferus said. "It is far, far worse than I thought. I thought we were fighting...an ordinary evil. So this is why the Jedi were destroyed. You were the only ones with the power to defeat him."

"Yes. So you see, I believe them capable of anything. Malorum is not a Sith, but the dark side is part of him. They will find some excuse for the executions. Then they're planning to shut down all comm systems on Bellassa. Embargo any information from leaving for a month. Close down the spaceport, isolate the planet completely. Eliminate all evidence. Then, if the news gets out, they can deny it. Ussa will be an example to the rest of the galaxy. This is part of a much, much bigger plan."

Ferus was silent for a long time. They had passed through the mountains and were now speeding along a vast empty plain. Ferus appeared to be concentrating on his piloting, as though they were moving through space traffic instead of empty air.

"First I must see Roan. Then I'll contact them. I trust everything you told me, Obi-Wan, but I have to give myself up. What choice do I have?"

"There is always more than one choice. At the risk of irritating you again, I want to remind you of some Jedi wisdom," Obi-Wan said.

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"I'm not a Jedi anymore."

"Really?" Obi-Wan said. "Then I must have imagined your command of the Force back in the tunnels."

"I'd hardly use the word command," Ferus said. "I was like a bantha calf."

"You can get it back," Obi-Wan said. "You've already begun. What you know has not been lost."

"Maybe I wanted it to be lost," Ferus said. "Maybe having the Force be a part of me was too hard after I left the Jedi."

"Now you can use it. You need it. It will be there."

"So, give me your wisdom, then, Obi-Wan," Ferus said. He propped one foot on the cockpit as he gripped the controls.

"Do what you must, but in an unexpected way."

"Ah. The first lesson of lightsaber training."

"No, the first lesson of lightsaber training was—don't fall down."

Ferus laughed softly. "I remember. "

"Then you must remember this—everything you learn in lightsaber training—"

"—can be used in life training," Ferus completed.

There was a short silence. "But what," Ferus said, "would be an unexpected way to give myself up?"

"At last," Obi-Wan said, "you have asked the right question."

Ferus stood at Roan's bedside.

"Hey, partner."

"Hey, partner."

"Any excuse for a lie down, I'd say."

Roan smiled. "Well, I sure never got a day off, working with you."

"He's doing better every hour," Amie Antin said.

Roan looked hard at Ferus. "You're giving yourself up, aren't you?"

Jude Watson

“Yes, but not in the way you’d expect.” Ferus turned to Obi-Wan. “My old friend has a plan.”

Wil, Rilla, and Amie looked over at him.

“We can’t take the deal at face value,” Obi-Wan said. “If we do, everyone will die. Instead, we will ensure that everyone will live.”

“How?” Wil asked.

“By using what you already have, not what you think you need,” Obi-Wan said.

“What do we have?” Wil asked. “We don’t have many weapons, or ships...”

“All we have is each other,” Rilla said.

“Exactly,” Obi-Wan said. “And that is all you need.”

Chapter Seventeen

Obi-Wan took Ferus to the narrow, entwined streets of the Moonstone District. Wrapped in a cloak, Ferus passed through the streets without being recognized.

“What are we doing here?” Ferus asked, a hint of impatience in his voice. “I’m running out of time...”

“You have seven more hours.”

“So you want to go shopping?”

“We’re going to meet up with someone,” Obi-Wan said. “A friend of yours, who, by the way, asked me to pass along a message to you.”

“What’s that?”

“You stink like a bantha.”

Ferus took this in, then laughed. “Trever? The kid who was always hanging around the office?”

They turned a corner into the alley and saw the boy, just struggling to push his gravsled out from its parking space behind a garbage container.

Trever looked up and saw Obi-Wan.

“No,” Trever said. “No, no, and no.”

Ferus threw back the hood of his cloak.

Jude Watson

Trever paled, and took a step back. “You’re alive.” Relief flooded his face, and it told Obi-Wan everything he needed to know.

“We need to talk,” Obi-Wan told Trever.

Trever took them to the place where he slept at night—Obi-Wan didn’t think the word “home” described it. He led them down another alley to a gray door, which he opened with a code.

“The foreman lets me sleep here,” he said. “I give him a deal on stuff.” He pushed open the door to a closet. The room was surprisingly warm.

“It’s next to the heaters,” Trever explained. “Nice in the wintertime. Have a seat.”

The room was furnished with a rolled-up sleep mat in a corner and one chair. The only other place to sit was the floor, so Ferus and Obi-Wan sat down. Trever sat down next to them.

“Can I get you something? Frosted cakes? Juice of the dewflower?” Trever grinned. “Just kidding. I don’t have anything.”

His joke seemed forced, and Obi-Wan thought he knew why.

“What did you steal from the Olin/Lands office?” he asked Trever.

Trever’s face seemed to close down. “Nothing.”

Ferus went still. Trever didn’t look at him.

“Right before Ferus and Roan were arrested.”

“I told you, nothing,” Trever said. “Is this why you came? Because—”

“Trever, it’s all right,” Obi-Wan said. “I think you need to tell Ferus. Was it something small, something you thought they wouldn’t miss?”

“I thought it was no big deal,” Trever said in a rush. “I thought...I thought it was something they were going to throw away. An old power droid with a busted motivator. They used to use it for backup power, but they put it in the junk pile.”

Ferus put his head in his hands.

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"You were throwing it away! Everything else I left alone, so in case they came back, they'd find it just like it was. The Imperials took away their datapads and their files, so I thought, a broken droid...I could just sell it on the black market."

"The droid," Ferus said. "We planted our coded files into the motivator. There's a way to access a data card....It makes the motivator look broken. It was our secret system."

"Who did you sell it to?"

"Just another kid. I was in the district, and he asked if I had any equipment for sale. I didn't think..."

Obi-Wan glanced at Ferus. "I think that boy was Boba Fett. I think he found out that Trever was in and out of your office. I think he found the files, and brought them to Malorum, and they were able to break the code. That's how Malorum knew that you and Roan had founded the Eleven. That's how they found your list of clients. Not the list on your datapad, but the real list...the list that included Dona." He turned back to Trever. "And you knew it. You suspected that you'd sold the droid to the wrong person."

"I didn't know for sure," Trever mumbled. "But yeah, I guessed it. I mean, Ferus and Roan were arrested right after. You were always straight with me, Ferus. I wouldn't have done it to you on purpose, even for all the credits on Bellassa. I mean, I'd steal from you from time to time, but I wouldn't turn you in."

"Now you can make up for it," Obi-Wan said. "You can help Ferus."

"How?"

Obi-Wan outlined what he needed. Trever was already shaking his head before Obi-Wan had finished.

"This is the craziest idea I've ever heard," he said. "Anyway, why do you need me?"

"Because you know Mariana's routine," Obi-Wan said. "And you know where, and how, to steal what we need."

"Look," Trever said. "I'm sorry for what I did to you, Ferus. But I don't stick my neck out. That's how I survive."

Jude Watson

Ferus leaned in closer. “We’re asking you to do something that’s hard,” he said. “You think resistance is futile. That’s what they want you to think. You think if you just take care of yourself, that is enough. That’s what they want you to think. So you make your life safe, and you follow their rules. That’s what they want you to do. And meanwhile, they steal your homeworld right from under your nose. And they tell you that your life is better. They tell you that they’re giving you peace and freedom, and they expect you to buy what they’re selling you. They’re counting on you to be quiet, to listen to their HoloNet and believe their lies. Are you going to give them what they want?”

Obi-Wan looked at Ferus. This was the charismatic leader the others had spoken of, the man who spoke plainly but could inspire. He could see the change in Trever, he could see how the boy raised his head as purpose flooded him again.

“I’ll do it,” he said. His eyes gleamed at Ferus. “But don’t think it’s because you convinced me. It’s because I like a good show.”

On the surface, the city had not changed. The Ussans came home from work, ate their evening meal, watched over their children. But beneath these ordinary things another purpose hummed. After months and months of helplessness, the people of Ussa were asked to risk. And they responded.

Ferus sent a message to the garrison. He would surrender at daybreak, but on one condition—that all the prisoners be released first.

He would stand outside the gates of the garrison, on the Commons. When every one of the prisoners had walked out, he would walk in.

Just before dawn, Obi-Wan sat in a small airspeeder in an alleyway off the Commons. The people of Ussa were thick in the streets. The Commons area in front of the garrison had been

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cleared by the stormtroopers, who stood outside the garrison gates, force pikes pointed out toward the crowd.

The crowd was silent, but they did not move. Bundled against the cold in their cloaks, they faced the gates, gazing down the green sward of grass toward the garrison, black and ominous in the gathering light. Beyond those gates was the prison where their loved ones were being held.

Wil had been worried that they would be ordered to disperse, but Obi-Wan had guessed correctly that the Imperial officers would want every Ussan to see the extent of their ruthlessness. They would pretend to release the prisoners, but once they had Ferus, they would catch them in the net of stormtroopers ringing the Commons. He was sure of it. His job was to time his rescue of Ferus perfectly. If the people of Ussa followed through, he would have a clear shot.

Mist rose from the grass. The sky was dark gray, but the shadows were beginning to lighten as a sudden hush came over the crowd. Ferus walked slowly through the streets, and they parted before him.

He walked down the long grassy lawn alone, a tall figure in a brown traveling cloak. He stopped at the gates of the garrison.

The silence grew until not even a cough, a footstep, could be heard. Not even an indrawn breath.

The gates slowly opened. A man appeared on the steps, wearing his bright yellow prison uniform. Another appeared. Then a woman. And then they all streamed out into the Commons. A squad of stormtroopers walked alongside them, keeping them together.

The prisoners milled in the grassy square, confused, fear on their faces. They searched the crowd anxiously for the familiar faces of family and friends.

Malorum appeared on the steps. He spoke, and his voice was amplified so that every citizen could hear it. "We are grateful to the citizens of Ussa for their cooperation in handing over the criminal Ferus Olin—"

Jude Watson

A murmur rose from the crowd. Handing over! They did not hand him over! He came of his own free will.

A squad of stormtroopers surrounded Ferus, their blaster rifles trained on him.

“Unfortunately, because of the unruly crowd, we will release the prisoners one by one to their families, but only after they undergo additional security checks—”

A moan grew from the crowd and gathered in intensity. Someone shouted “No!” So close to freedom, the prisoners began to move forward. Nothing lay between them and the streets filled with their families.

“No,” Obi-Wan whispered. “Don’t move. Not yet...”

“The prisoners are rioting! Seize them!” Malorum called.

Here it is, Obi-Wan thought. *The double cross*. He shot up into the sky in the airspeeder, but he kept it hovering. If he went too soon, the stormtroopers would turn on the prisoners. It was agonizing, but he had to wait a few more seconds.

The people of Ussa shouted in protest, and began to move toward the prisoners. The stormtroopers raised their force pikes.

His hands tightened on the airspeeder’s controls. He had to wait until the stormtroopers were distracted. If they thought he was coming in to attack, they would open fire.

The people of Ussa threw off their cloaks.

They rushed forward in a wave. The stormtroopers were overwhelmed. And confused—suddenly there were uniforms everywhere. A vast sea of yellow prisoner uniforms, but also Imperial officers, here and there. They could not fire their blasters or use their force pikes if there was a chance Imperial officers could be in the crowd.

Obi-Wan shot forward as the citizens flowed onto the Commons. They mingled with the prisoners, enfolding them until in a matter of seconds it was impossible to tell who had been a prisoner and who had not. And there were hundreds more behind them, all in uniforms, all massed in the streets, pouring out of doorways.

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Trever had stolen the uniforms Mariana collected to launder, and even the material the prudent tailor had stockpiled. Working all night, each citizen had either found or fashioned a uniform until the entire city was ready to meet the Imperials.

The idea of a prisoner became meaningless. Every citizen in Ussa was a prisoner. And what Obi-Wan had counted on had happened—Malorum could not give an order to shoot, because he could not—not yet, anyway—mow down the citizens of an entire city.

Soaring above, Obi-Wan thought he had never seen such courage. Every citizen was willing to give his or her life. Everyone was committed.

Malorum, he could see, was furious—and frustrated. With a crisp order, he turned, and the stormtroopers surrounding Ferus suddenly clamped stun cuffs on him and pulled him toward the doorway.

No! Obi-Wan exclaimed in his mind. If they moved Ferus inside that garrison, he would never come out again. He was too dangerous to allow to live.

They had been taking a chance, of course. They had counted on the diversion to ensure that Obi-Wan would be able to get to Ferus in time. But Malorum's words had enflamed the crowd, and they had surged forward a few crucial seconds ahead of time. Obi-Wan was still too far away.

The garrison doors were closing. Obi-Wan would not let it end this way. He would not lose Ferus. Not like this.

Chapter Eighteen

Obi-Wan flipped the airspeeder sideways and dived down, aiming it directly at the closing gap at the garrison front doors. He heard the screech of metal as he squeezed into the gap, and he heard a *clunk* as something on the side of the speeder was sheared off. He just hoped it wasn't something crucial; he didn't have time to look.

Ferus was being borne away down a wide hallway, surrounded by stormtroopers. Fortunately, the ceiling here was very high to allow transports and machinery through. With the stun cuffs binding his wrists, if he made a wrong move they could send a charge that would bring him to his knees. He had felt Obi-Wan, although the stormtroopers hadn't seen him, not yet. Obi-Wan felt a surge of the Force as Ferus sent it flying toward him.

Malorum happened to turn. He was dressed in a hooded robe, as always, and Obi-Wan could only see dark holes for eyes, the dead black of hate.

He drew his lightsaber. He had no choice. Now Malorum would know for sure, if Fett had not told him yet, that a Jedi was still alive. He did not like to expose himself this way.

But Obi-Wan knew he had to do it. It was beings like Ferus who would pave the way, who would keep fighting, who would weaken the Empire in a thousand small ways that would add up

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to eventual victory. Now he understood Qui-Gon's words. He had seen firsthand the loyalty Ferus could inspire.

As the airspeeder descended, he slashed at the stun cuffs. He felt the shock all the way up his shoulder as the charge rang through him, but the stun cuffs clattered to the floor. He did not flinch, did not stop. He could feel the Force moving, pulsing, and he used it to Force-push the stormtroopers away as he reached down a hand for Ferus.

Ferus grasped his hand. The Force ran through them, a chain that would not be broken.

He pulled, and Ferus came up, propelled by his own strength and by the strength of the Force. Ferus swung one leg over the airspeeder and Obi-Wan pushed the engines hard. The speeder rocketed up, wobbling a bit from the added weight of Ferus and whatever had fallen off that had compromised its balance.

The blaster fire began. Obi-Wan had to deal with the speeder. He tossed the lightsaber back to Ferus. Ferus jumped to stand on the airspeeder.

He could see, out of the corner of his eye, how fast and accurate Ferus was, deflecting blaster fire on the weaving vehicle. He kept pace with the turns, amazingly able to balance without falling off. Obi-Wan careened down the wide hallway. It was hard to negotiate such a tight space on an airspeeder, especially one that wasn't balanced, and he was afraid of knocking Ferus off.

Someone shot off a rocket. They heard the *whoosh* of air displacement.

"Left!" Ferus shouted, looking back, and Obi-Wan yanked the speeder to the left.

The targeting computer sent the rocket after them. The airspeeder did a wild dance in the air, zigzagging crazily down the hall while officers and troopers dived for cover. The rocket missed them by a millimeter and exploded against a wall, sending several stormtroopers flying. Obi-Wan felt it stir his hair. That was way too close for his comfort.

Jude Watson

The engine began to smoke. Obi-Wan pushed it one last time, making a sudden, quick right turn into an empty hallway. The speeder made the turn but then the steering gave out. Obi-Wan and Ferus leaped off and the airspeeder crashed into the wall.

The vehicle burst into flames. The hallway filled up with smoke. Alarms went off. Sprinklers sprayed water down on the hallway.

They had seconds. Less than seconds.

Above their heads, Obi-Wan spied an air vent. He wrenched the cover off.

Ferus needed no prompting. He hoisted himself up and swung his legs inside. Obi-Wan followed, pulling himself up and into a wide plastoid duct in the air control system. He repositioned the vent. They wouldn't take long to figure out where they'd gone, but this should buy a few minutes.

Ferus began to crawl down the duct, moving as silently as a Jedi.

They had only crawled a few meters when they heard the blaster fire riddle the vent cover. They heard the clang as it fell.

They hadn't bought minutes, after all. Only a few seconds. Which, considering that they were in the midst of an Imperial garrison, wasn't nearly enough.

They quickly scurried around a curve. Ferus pointed to a filtering screen. Obi-Wan nodded. Carefully, Ferus lifted it off and disappeared through the hole. Obi-Wan followed. Ferus was balanced on a water pipe, holding the screen. Obi-Wan hoisted himself out, and Ferus replaced the screen. They were now outside the air grid and in the middle of a matrix of pipes. Some of the pipes were hot, and the air felt close and steamy.

They would have to move by hanging onto the pipes. It would take extraordinary stamina, but the stormtroopers would not think of checking for them there.

Ferus moved hand over hand quickly. Obi-Wan followed. They moved swiftly through the building until they could not hear their pursuers in the adjacent airflow ducts.

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Ferus hauled himself up and straddled a pipe. Obi-Wan did the same. Ferus's forehead was damp with sweat. "Any ideas on where to go next?"

"We'll never get out of here if we don't know where we are," Obi-Wan said. "We have to find an exit."

"If we find an empty office with a datapad, we can look up the building diagrams," Ferus said. "We need a couple of exit strategies."

"Let's try it," Obi-Wan agreed.

They continued on until they found a utility panel below them. Obi-Wan hung by his knees. He closed his eyes, listening, searching for the living Force. When he was sure, he pried off the panel. Past the sensor suite inside, he could look down into an empty office. There was just enough room to crawl through.

Carefully Obi-Wan wiggled into the sensor suite and then dropped into the room. Ferus followed. The room held only a table made out of one slab of polished stone and one chair. A cloak with a deep hood was thrown over the chair. It was the darkest of maroons, the red of a terrible bruise.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Obi-Wan said. "I think we've landed in Malorum's private office."

Ferus's eyes gleamed. "We get lucky at last."

"My point is, hurry up."

Ferus moved immediately to the datapad on the table. Obi-Wan stood guard at the door.

"Find the building schematic first," Obi-Wan said. "If we don't get out of here, we can't do much of anything."

"Right. I'll download the building diagrams." Ferus quickly accessed the file and downloaded it into his pocket datapad. He tossed it to Obi-Wan while he accessed the files.

"He's got tons of surveillance files, but not much on Bellassa...hey, have you ever heard of a place called Polis Massa?"

Obi-Wan felt himself turn to ice. "Yes."

Ferus began to scroll through the file. "It's got about ten levels of security on the file. Must be something."

Jude Watson

“Try to crack it.”

“Okay...” Ferus’s fingers flew over the keys. “I got the first one...he hired an investigator to examine med records from the clinic. But there’s no record of what he was looking for. Or if he found anything.”

Obi-Wan closed his eyes briefly. Polis Massa was where they had taken Padmé to deliver her children in safety. In what he had thought was safety. It was where she had died.

Here it was. Here was the connection he was looking for. Ferus was the key, because the man who was looking for Ferus was looking for information on Padmé’s death as well. The rumor was that she’d been killed by a Jedi during the “rebellion.”

“He’s gathering data for Lord Vader, but he hasn’t transmitted any,” Ferus said. “I can’t make it out. The security controls are too tight.”

“Someone’s coming.”

“Aw, I was just going to take the wheels off his chair.”

“Ferus, will you come on?” Obi-Wan jumped behind the curtains. It wasn’t the best hiding place, but they didn’t have much choice. They didn’t have time to get up into the ceiling again.

They heard the door swish open. Heavy boots thumped in.

Obi-Wan peeked through the curtain. He had to suppress a groan. It was Malorum—and Boba Fett.

Chapter Nineteen

Ferus heard Malorum's voice ring through the room. He and Obi-Wan could see through a slit in the heavy curtains.

"I took a chance on you." Malorum's voice hissed like a slithering creature. "Even though you failed to bring me what I needed on Polis Massa, or Naboo. Your record, despite your youth, was impressive."

Boba Fett was no longer wearing his helmet. He stood, holding it under one arm. His dark eyes didn't flicker despite the abuse. Ferus had seen that look before, in other young beings after the wars. They had seen too much and had suffered too much at an early age. Boys like Trever. Yet Trever, despite his criminal ways, was good at heart. This one, Ferus thought, was damaged.

"You let them get away!" Malorum raised his voice and hit each word hard.

Still, Boba said nothing. Ferus was impressed and a little disconcerted at Boba's silence. The young man had a little too much assurance. It was unnerving.

Even Malorum looked unsettled. "Aren't you going to say anything? Because of you, Ferus Olin escaped and was able to return to Ussa. Now he's somewhere in this building!"

Jude Watson

“Isn’t that what you wanted?” Boba asked. “You wanted to show the citizens of Ussa that you could get him. You got him. If he’s in the building, you’ll find him. He can’t get out.”

Malorum leaned in closer. “You were hired to find him. I’m telling you that he’s here. Bring him to me.”

“I told you when I took the job that I needed to know everything,” Boba said. “You didn’t tell me Jedi would be involved.”

“I didn’t know.”

“It was your business to know it.”

“Did you recognize him?”

“No. But he’s very skilled.”

“Interesting,” Malorum murmured. “Are you using the Jedi as an excuse for your failure?”

“No,” Boba said. “It just makes the job more challenging. And more expensive.”

“You have already been paid the top rate,” Malorum said. “I’m not authorized to pay any more.”

“Then get authorized,” Boba said.

“I need you to track them right now! They could be anywhere!”

Boba still didn’t answer.

“This will be your last job for me,” Malorum hissed angrily. “Consider yourself authorized. Now get that lethal companion of yours and find those two. And don’t fail this time.”

The door opened. Boba Fett strode out. Malorum followed, the train on his robe twitching like a tail.

“That Boba seems eerily competent,” Ferus murmured. “Can you imagine what his father was like?”

“All too well,” Obi-Wan said, remembering a certain battle on Kamino.

Obi-Wan accessed the building diagrams and studied them quickly. “There’s a landing platform next to the prison area. It’s used for a service entrance and also the registration for prisoner

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transfer. I think we should try that one. We can get there through the piping system.”

“Not to argue with you, Obi-Wan, but wouldn’t you think there might be additional security in the prison?”

“Trever told me that the Imperials couldn’t get the citizens of the city to help them with garbage collection, laundry, things like that—it was hard to find people who would profit from the occupation of their planet.”

“Yes. It drove the Imperials crazy. They have to import most of their support services. They hate that.”

“They brought in droids to run all the internal waste removal and laundry collection systems. According to Trever, Mariana picks up the laundry from the droids at nine every morning. That means the droids have to access the service door...”

“...to the landing platform, where there might be a vehicle for us to liberate. That’s in about six minutes.” Ferus pushed his hands through his hair. “Are you telling me that in order to get out of here, I have to break *into* prison?”

Obi-Wan nodded.

“I like your thinking, Master Kenobi.”

Back up into the vent again, they squeezed along the tiny opening that led to the pipes. There was a larger outflow pipe here that they were able to crawl on top of. Obi-Wan had memorized the route, and he led the way to the prison.

Suddenly he stopped. “We must be entering the prison now,” he said. “There’s a security system up ahead.”

“Can you tell what kind?”

“Infrared. It scans for all known body temperatures and bypasses mechanical heating systems. Just in case one of the prisoners decides to crawl up into a vent to hide, I suppose. An alarm will go off.”

“Let me disable it.”

“No, that will just tip them off. We’re going to have to use the Force to slow our body processes down. We don’t have far to go. Do you think you could manage it?”

Jude Watson

Ferus hesitated. "Maybe. But if I can't, you'll be caught. I'm still rusty, and if I fail, we both fail. You go, Obi-Wan. I'll find another way."

Obi-Wan held his gaze. "You can do it. I've felt it. I know you can do it. I know you can be a Jedi again."

Ferus swallowed. What if he was responsible for Obi-Wan being captured? He had dragged him into this.

Come on, Ferus, I can see you thinking. Siri's crooked grin rose in his mind. Looks like it might hurt, thinking that hard. Let's just go ahead and do it. Let your thoughts be actions until you aren't thinking at all. Just moving.

"Let's do it," he said.

They reached out for the Force together, and he felt it grow.

I know you can be a Jedi again.

He closed his eyes, calling on the Force and willing his body temperature to drop. He felt his skin, and it was cold.

Obi-Wan began to move. Ferus followed. They moved quickly, their bodies staying cool despite the heat coming from the pipes. Ferus didn't feel it. He felt only the Force, and the connection to Obi-Wan.

Remembering the diagram, Obi-Wan kicked through a vent and they landed in a closet. They peeked out the door. They saw a droid with a repulsorlift cart filled with laundry. He stopped outside a room and entered, leaving the cart outside.

Ferus and Obi-Wan slipped out the door and leaped into the cart, burrowing underneath sheets and comforters. A moment later a load of towels was dropped on their heads. The cart lurched forward.

The cart moved slowly down the hall as the droid stopped every few meters to collect more laundry. At last they drew up in front of the door leading to the private landing platform.

The droid moved forward to access the control panel.

Suddenly there was the sound of booted feet striking the hard floor. A voice rang out: "Stop!" It was a lower-ranked Imperial officer, accompanied by a lone stormtrooper.

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The droid turned. "Access to landing platform daily at this time."

"We're on high alert. No exits. That includes building utility servicing."

The sensor light flashed.

"Laundry service requesting delivery," the droid said.

"Tell them to go away," the officer said curtly.

The droid moved forward and pressed a button on the security panel. "No laundry service today. No admittance to landing platform."

"Aw, c'mon, chief!"

Ferus and Obi-Wan exchanged a glance. It was Trever.

"Not a chief, a service droid. No admittance," the droid repeated.

"I'm not leaving."

The Imperial officer strode forward. "Then we'll blast you out. Get moving." He pressed a button, and a vidscreen was suddenly filled with Trever's image.

"Look, I've got General Malorum's robes here—" Trever said.

"He's not a general, he's Inquisitor Malorum."

"Whatever. I've got his robes, and he specifically requested this morning delivery."

"We're on high alert..."

"Yeah, yeah, I heard that. So you tell him he won't get his stuff. Have you ever told him one of his orders wasn't followed?" Trever shrugged. "Better you than me."

"Hold on."

Obi-Wan could see a trickle of sweat bead on the officer's hairline and drip down the side of his face. He could refuse the delivery, and Malorum would blame him. Or he could just let the delivery pass through, and Malorum would get his robes.

"Just this one delivery," the officer told the droid as he pressed the release.

Jude Watson

The droid activated the cart and it began to move toward the doors.

They were almost there. Almost free.

An alarm suddenly sounded, and the door stopped sliding open.

“Something overrode the door,” the officer said nervously.

Ferus and Obi-Wan leaped out of the cart at the same instant. This was their only chance, and they had to take it.

The officer turned, his mouth agape, and began to fumble for his blaster. Obi-Wan leaped up and Force-pushed the officer against the wall.

The stormtrooper had his blaster out. Ferus held out a hand to Force-push him away from the door, but nothing happened.

Well, it’s not like he could expect to get it right every time.

He charged forward, leading with his shoulder, and slammed into the officer, knocking him down. Obi-Wan leaped through the opening, and Ferus followed.

The gravsled was empty. Trever must have taken off on foot when the alarm sounded. Ferus saw the Firespray on one end of the platform. Another silver cruiser was near the checkpoint. As much as Ferus would have enjoyed stealing Boba Fett’s, the other was closer. They raced toward it.

Blaster fire suddenly peppered the shell of the cruiser. Stormtroopers were pouring after them. Obi-Wan’s lightsaber was a dancing arc of light.

Ferus jumped into the cockpit. He swung the cannons toward the line of stormtroopers and blasted away.

Obi-Wan jumped inside the cruiser. Across the hangar, a dark streak dashed. It was Boba Fett, racing for his Firespray. Ferus took off.

They shot into the sky. Below, the city of Ussa became a small blue dot. Within seconds, they had blasted out of the atmosphere and were in space.

“We have to jump to hyperspace. It’s the only way we can lose Fett,” Obi-Wan said.

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“I know.”

“As long as you remain on the planet, the Empire will use you to threaten the citizens. Once we leave, you might not be able to return for a long time. Maybe never.”

Ferus gave one backward glance at Bellassa. He thought of everything he was leaving. He thought of Roan.

“I know,” he said again.

Chapter Twenty

Once they were in hyperspace, they didn't speak for awhile. Ferus felt an enormous pain in his heart. He was not a native Bellassan, but he had adopted that world. It was his homeworld. He had made a life there. He felt as if he had been cut in two.

Obi-Wan put in the coordinates of a spaceport that orbited a pair of dying stars called the Red Twins. The Empire's reach did not extend that far, at least in terms of constant monitoring. He ran checks on the systems, giving Ferus time to recover. Ferus had gotten to know Obi-Wan better over the space of two days than he'd known him in all his years in the Jedi Temple. He had always known that Obi-Wan had courage, but he had seen his sensitivity to emotion, too.

"What was it about Polis Massa?" Ferus asked, breaking the silence. "You looked as blue as a Twi'lek when I read the name."

Obi-Wan stared into the depths of the nav computer. The glow of the screen made him look suddenly haggard.

"I can't tell you," he said. "It concerns something...information I must keep to myself. If I give it away, it could endanger you, and more than you....It could endanger what you believe in." Obi-Wan turned to face him. "This isn't about trust. I trust you, Ferus. But I am returning to where I make my exile. If you need me, we can figure out a way for you

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to call on me. You don't understand this, but I believe that the future of the galaxy lies in my ability to wait."

"All right," Ferus said. "That is your task. But mine is to locate as many Jedi as I can find. There must be others. The Force-sensitive who need help. Jedi who have gone underground. I know they're out there. I'll find them. If I can establish a safe place, we can be ready for what comes."

"Another war?"

"It is inevitable. Especially since you've told me the Emperor is a Sith."

"All the more reason to wait." Obi-Wan sighed. "But before we part, I wanted to ask you something. I always suspected that Anakin played a part in your leaving the Jedi."

"Everyone played a part," Ferus said, evading the question. "What difference does it make? They're all dead now."

He had seen how hard it was for Obi-Wan to say Anakin's name. He must miss his apprentice. Ferus wondered how Anakin had died, but he didn't want to ask. He didn't want to dredge up a painful memory for Obi-Wan.

And he didn't want to tell him the real story of his resignation from the Jedi. How he suspected that Anakin had deliberately withheld information about Tru Veld's lightsaber, knowing it would fail in battle. Because of that, Darra Thel-Tanis had died. Yet Ferus had felt responsible. He had fixed Tru's lightsaber and kept it a secret, a violation of the rules between Master and Padawan. Anakin had known it, and kept it a secret, too.

It was all so long ago. Mistakes made by boys, by Padawans with dreams of becoming great Jedi Masters.

The dreams had died. It was so hard for Ferus to accept that the Jedi Order had died, too. He would not believe it. He would not allow himself to believe it. He would scour the galaxy until he found every last one of them. His cause had been Bellassa. Now it was the survival of the galaxy itself.

"I should have realized it," Obi-Wan spoke up. Ferus realized he was still thinking about Ferus's resignation from the Order. "I

Jude Watson

should have asked more questions. Something didn't feel right at the time."

"It doesn't matter," Ferus said. "I walked away. It was the most difficult thing I ever had to do, but in a way I'm glad it happened."

"You're still a Jedi, Ferus."

"No," Ferus said slowly. "I'm not. I can never really be a Jedi again. Not just because I left the Order." He looked back, in the direction of Bellassa. "I have attachments."

"Once there was something I wanted, something forbidden by the Jedi code," Obi-Wan said. "Qui-Gon said something to me then. He said, maybe in a different galaxy things will change. The Jedi will change. Here is the change, Ferus. And I think...in the new order, attachments will be a strength. Maybe this is how the galaxy will be saved. So yes, you are still a Jedi."

Suddenly, a head with spiky blue hair popped out of a storage closet. "You're a Jedi, Ferus? You monkey lizard—that's galactic!"

Ferus rose from his seat. "Trever! What are you doing here?"

Trever squeezed out of the tiny space and tumbled out onto the cockpit floor. He rose, dusting off his coveralls. "What did you expect me to do when the alarms went off? I hid."

"You knew we would be heading for this cruiser," Obi-Wan said sternly. "You could have said something before we jumped to hyperspace. Why did you stay hidden?"

"I need a vacation?" Trever said.

"Great. Enjoy the ride," Ferus said. "As soon as we land, I'm putting you on the first transport back."

"You can't," Trever said. "I was recognized at the checkpoint. They have my image in their databank. They'll throw me in prison. Probably execute me for helping you escape." He grinned at Ferus's annoyed expression. "Looks like you're stuck with me."

"How lucky can you get," Ferus said.

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So, despite his best efforts to become an exile, he had managed to become a Jedi again. Obi-Wan stared down at his lightsaber. Something deep stirred in him, and for the first time in a long, long while, it wasn't pain or regret. It was purpose. He understood now, more fully than he had, that justice would rise again. He couldn't predict when or how, but he knew beings like Ferus would be a part of it. When he had told Ferus that attachments could be a source of strength, he had been speaking for himself, too. The tug that had brought him to Ferus's side had been more than a concern for Luke. It had reconnected him to something he had lost. He had spent so many months thinking of the dead. Dreaming of them. Now it was time to join the living.

That was why watching over Luke was so crucial. That was why he couldn't lose hope, couldn't falter. Everything he knew was gone, and when things changed, they would not change in the way he wanted. He would not get back all that he'd lost. He realized now how much of his bitterness had been tied up in that simple, childish wish—to have back what he'd loved.

What he loved was gone forever.

What would come he couldn't see.

What he had to do to make it happen, he would do. He would do it out of more than duty now. He would do it with his heart.

They came out of hyperspace close to their destination. The Red Twins were hidden in a dense nebula, and they had to use the nav computer to make their way. Then, suddenly, they had a visual sighting, a reddish haze that looked like one faint star.

Obi-Wan gave their position to the spaceport, and they were cleared to land. Ferus dropped the cruiser neatly into the target landing area and then manually guided it to a parking space. He stretched.

"I could use a meal and a rest," he said.

Jude Watson

“I’m afraid you’ll have to wait a bit longer for that,” Obi-Wan said.

Foreboding snaked through Ferus. He followed Obi-Wan’s gaze out the viewscreen to the crowded spaceport. Parked only meters away was the Firespray attack ship.

Boba Fett had found them.

STAR WARS.

LAST OF THE JEDI

DARK WARNING

BY JUDE WATSON

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Chapter One

He was getting closer. Within minutes, he would spot them.

Obi-Wan Kenobi watched from the cockpit of a grounded, dilapidated cruiser as Boba Fett methodically searched the crowded Red Twins spaceport, looking for his prey. The Jedi saw Fett's compact body move down the rows of space cruisers, his helmet turning as he and his surveillance devices took everything in.

Obi-Wan could see that Fett was moving in a pattern that only seemed random. The bounty hunter was cutting over after every third ship to the next line, then skipping a row, moving backward, then moving forward on alternate rows. It was a complex pattern to follow for an ordinary being, but not for an exceptional tracker like Boba Fett...or a Jedi like Obi-Wan. To an observer, Fett would seem to be ambling in a casual fashion, but within a few minutes he would have checked out every ship in the spaceport. Including the Jedi's.

Obi-Wan saw his companion, Ferus Olin, watching Fett from the shadows of the cockpit.

"I give us three minutes," Ferus said.

"Two and a half," Obi-Wan amended.

Ferus and Obi-Wan had landed at the Red Twin spaceport just a few minutes before, along with their stowaway, thirteen-

Jude Watson

year-old Trever Flume. They had tangled with Boba Fett on the planet Bellassa, and were acutely aware of his skills. Plus, he had another bounty hunter with him—D’harhan, a cyborg with an unattractive but lethal laser cannon for a head. Imperial security forces, led by the Inquisitor Malorum, had hired the bounty hunters to catch Ferus, a hero of the resistance movement on Bellassa.

Even as Obi-Wan ticked off their possibilities for escape, he wanted to kick himself down the spaceport for being here in the first place. He had been on Tatooine when he had heard Ferus was in trouble—Tatooine, where he was supposed to stay and watch over the young Luke Skywalker. Obi-Wan had always liked the former Jedi apprentice, who had left the Order right before he was scheduled to take the Trials—in fact, he had been relieved that someone who had been so close to the Jedi was still alive. But was saving Ferus enough of a reason to risk leaving Tatooine? Obi-Wan had been racked with indecision...until he heard his former Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, who had at last spoken to him, thanks to Qui-Gon’s training with the Whills.

What a shock it had been to hear Qui-Gon’s voice, and how unsurprising it should have been that Qui-Gon had been the one to tell him to leave. Things much bigger than Ferus were at stake, and Qui-Gon told him he needed to follow the Living Force...and his feelings.

So he had followed them to Bellassa, had become tangled up with the resistance, and had barely escaped with Ferus. Now he was halfway across the galaxy from Tatooine, with two bounty hunters on his tail. Meanwhile, Inquisitor Malorum was getting closer to the truth of Luke and Leia’s existence, by investigating Polis Massa, the place where their mother, Padmé Amidala, had died. Obi-Wan knew he had to stop Malorum...but first he had to dodge the bounty hunters on his trail. Obi-Wan couldn’t return to Tatooine until he had shaken them off. He couldn’t lead anyone to the hidden son of Anakin Skywalker.

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“Hey, fellas?” Trever spoke up. His spiky blue hair seemed to quiver with anxiety as he looked from Obi-Wan to Ferus. “Not to jump in here, but shouldn’t we be taking off in a hurry-up-and-blast-me-outta-here sort of way?”

“He’ll just follow us,” Ferus said. “And there’s no way we’ll shake him in this bucket. We need a different ship. This won’t end until we get one and get out of here.”

“Right, excellent,” Trever said. “Not a problem. Just give me a minute.”

“You can’t steal one,” Obi-Wan warned.

“Sure I can,” the young teenager said. “All I have to do is bypass the initial ignition security controls, then—”

Obi-Wan held up his hand. “*Then* we’ll have security to contend with as well as Boba Fett. We have to do this without causing any alarm.”

“There’s a new concept for you, kid,” Ferus said to Trever.

“I’ll try to keep up,” Trever replied with a grin. Despite his young age, he had been the most adept street thief in the capital city of Ussa on Bellassa. At only thirteen, he had controlled a large portion of the black market. When things got too hot for him, he had stowed away with Obi-Wan and Ferus as they’d made their escape.

But if things had been one-sun hot then, they were three-sun hot now.

Quickly, Obi-Wan, Ferus, and Trever gathered their survival packs and jumped off the ship. Obi-Wan made sure to cloak himself, his head unrecognizable under a hood. He did not want to be recognized by Boba Fett.

“We’ll have to try a trade. The trick is,” Obi-Wan said under his breath as he kept his eyes on the roving figure of Boba Fett, “to pick the right ship. And the right pilot. He’s got to think he’s getting a deal, but the deal can’t be too good or he’ll get suspicious.”

“I wonder where D’harhan is,” Ferus said.

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“Probably stayed on the ship,” Obi-Wan guessed. “He’d attract the attention of security.”

They disembarked from their ship and threaded through the grumbling crowd. The new Empire regulations had made check-in slow, and departures were often held up while lengthy security checks were gone through. Pilots and passengers milled around, killing time until their numbers flashed on a huge screen overhead. At that point they joined the line to the security checkpoint inside the main building. Some of them had turned the area in front of the hangar into an informal picnic area, and the bartering of food and drink was going on in a lively exchange typical of pilots, as they variously insulted and flattered each other into trades.

Obi-Wan perused the ships. They needed something with a hyperdrive, something spaceworthy but not too flashy. They needed speed and some kind of weaponry. Knowing Boba Fett’s heavily armed Firespray attack ship, laser cannons would certainly come in handy.

In his head, Obi-Wan counted off the rows of ships and the complex pattern Fett was following. If they kept weaving in a counter-pattern, they wouldn’t run into him. Of course, he would find their ship very soon, and his surveillance would intensify. But if they were lucky, they’d blast off the spaceport by then.

If they were lucky.

Which they weren’t.

Boba Fett changed his pattern and spotted them from afar, attacking immediately from behind. The Force surged, warning Obi-Wan only a split second before the bounty hunter was on them.

Blaster bolts streaked toward them. Obi-Wan leaped and dodged. He didn’t want to use his lightsaber—not here, with a crowd looking on. News that a Jedi had been seen would spread, and the hunt would intensify. As far as the galaxy was concerned, all the Jedi had been wiped out. Any Jedi who was found would quickly share the same fate.

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Ferus's Jedi training made him move quicker than an ordinary bystander, dodging almost in time with Obi-Wan. Trever's street smarts sent him diving under the belly of a ship. A surprised pilot poked his head out of his cockpit dome a second after blaster bolts ripped into his hull. He started to swear at Boba Fett, but backed down when Fett swiveled and aimed his Westar-34 blaster in his direction.

The diversion gave Obi-Wan two seconds—two seconds that spun out into a long moment of contemplation, as he pinpointed the exact location of the ships surrounding him, the crowd, the buildings. He saw opportunity for temporary shelter but he did not see what he was looking for—an avenue of escape.

When in doubt, he thought, *do the unexpected*. Obi-Wan charged, his hood still concealing his identity. He lunged into the teeth of the blaster fire, weaponless. A surprised Boba Fett took a step back. He was too good to stumble, but for the smallest whisper of a second he was slightly off balance. Obi-Wan saw it. Fett's left side was the vulnerable point.

He leaped. In midair, he twisted, coming down with one boot planted squarely on Boba Fett's left knee. But to his surprise, Fett didn't go over. Obi-Wan felt the bounty hunter's body give, but suddenly Fett reversed direction, planting himself more firmly. Obi-Wan was stopped cold and had the unpleasant sensation of feeling an armored elbow smash into the back of his head, sending him to the ground.

He'd seen that move before. The memory of a desperate fight on Kamino came back to him. Jango Fett had taught his son well. If only Obi-Wan had remembered it in time.

Ferus came charging as Obi-Wan rolled to his feet, ducking blaster bolts with his Jedi reflexes. Suddenly, the ship next to them exploded. Obi-Wan and Ferus were sent flying by the power of the blast, riding a cushion of air that slammed them into the permacrete. Molten durasteel rained around them. Ferus ducked as a cockpit seat landed only millimeters from his head.

"Well, hello, D'harhan," Ferus said through gritted teeth.

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There was a moment of shocked silence after the blast, and then sirens began to sound. Pilots and passengers searched for a safe vantage point from which to watch the battle. It had been a boring afternoon, and no one minded a little diversion. It promised to be a good fight.

Ferus popped to his feet. His face was black with smoke and dust from the explosion. “Love the way those guys introduce themselves,” he said to Obi-Wan.

Boba Fett was taking advantage of the explosion to move in, his blaster bolts streaking through the air. Obi-Wan knew he had to get under cover, away from the spectators. Somewhere he could use his lightsaber without attracting attention.

“Go left,” he said tersely to Ferus. “Keep D’harhan occupied.”

“Why do *I* always get the mean guy?” Ferus replied, with more humor than Obi-Wan remembered him having as an apprentice.

Ferus seemed to float away, he moved so gracefully, sliding between two starships and disappearing. Obi-Wan used the Force to propel his jump, clearing the ship on his right and landing on the peaked durasteel roof of the hangar. There was a dormer midway down the roof, a window that was built into the roof itself. Obi-Wan dived for cover behind the overhang.

Fett was wearing a jetpack, and he soared above to land on the roof only seconds after Obi-Wan. He advanced cautiously, unable to see the Jedi. Obi-Wan activated his lightsaber. He did it so rarely now that he felt a surge of feelings flood him when he did, something close to pain and joy, a remembrance of what it had once meant to be a Jedi. Once he had traveled freely through the galaxy. Now he had to hide what he was. Now all he knew was secrecy and caution.

Blaster bolts suddenly ripped through the dormer, only centimeters from where he waited. Boba Fett was taking no chances.

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Obi-Wan didn't move, even though he felt the sear of heat on his cheek.

He heard the footsteps approaching. Just as they reached the corner of the dormer, just when there was only a split second before Fett would see him, Obi-Wan leaped out.

But Fett must have been expecting this. Taking barely a second to aim, he fired the concussion missile in his jetpack.

Obi-Wan felt the shock waves reverberate. He was blown off the roof, his body lifting into the air like a scrap of cloth. He slowed down the moment, looking for a way to land that wouldn't involve smashing into the permacrete rising toward him.

He reached for the grapnel line on his utility belt. He sent it flying as he fell, the hook catching on the edge of the roof. He bounced in the air, hard, wrenching his shoulder as he quickly swung himself back up. He hit the roof and kept going, charging at Fett, his lightsaber glowing. He severed Fett's blaster rifle in one clean stroke.

Obi-Wan had nowhere to go as Fett suddenly slammed into him, wrapping his arms around the Jedi's body, knocking away his lightsaber, and propelling him backward, trying to push him off the roof. Instead of trying to break Fett's grip, Obi-Wan seized his arms, and the two men shot off the edge, spinning in midair. The crowd below saw them now and gasped.

The two bodies fell through the air for several long seconds before Fett activated his jetpack. As he fired his thrusters, he maneuvered the jetpack so he could slam Obi-Wan against the side of the building repeatedly. Obi-Wan felt the blows shudder through his bones.

Fett reversed and came at the building again. Obi-Wan saw the solid duracrete zooming toward his face. He called on the Force to help. He would need it. At the last moment, he drew his legs up and kicked out. The jolt radiated up through his skull. They spun out, and Obi-Wan used the opportunity to loosen

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Fett's hold. He dropped, gathering the Force to ease his landing and recapture his fallen lightsaber.

He didn't injure himself, but the pain that traveled up his legs told him that his push off the wall had cost him. Spectators scattered as he rose to his feet. Boba Fett was coming after him, relentless.

Ferus ran through the crowd. Obi-Wan felt the Force surge in warning as another cannon blast from D'harhan leveled part of the hangar.

Ferus was blown back by the blast. D'harhan kept coming. Boba Fett was gathering himself for another assault. Obi-Wan charged forward, grabbed Ferus, and pulled him to his feet.

"Come on," Obi-Wan urged. He hadn't come this far to lose Ferus now.

He helped Ferus stumble past the rubble and leap into the half-demolished hangar. Massive doors were on the other end, firmly shut tight. D'harhan and Boba Fett followed through the opening, blocking any way out.

Obi-Wan and Ferus were trapped.

Chapter Two

Fett and D'harhan didn't give them a chance to form a strategy. The bounty hunters were all movement, D'harhan passing Fett a blaster so they could both fire at will. The air filled with debris and smoke.

"I wish I had a lightsaber," Ferus muttered as he and Obi-Wan dived for cover behind a large ship awaiting repair. He had turned in his lightsaber when he'd left the Order. "Now would be an excellent time to draw yours, Obi-Wan."

Still, Obi-Wan waited. He and Ferus settled back against a large repair console filled with tools. He saw the smoke curl from D'harhan's head, and he knew the laser cannons had overheated. Boba Fett's blaster fire couldn't penetrate the ship. They were safe for the moment.

But only for the moment. Obi-Wan scanned the hangar. Despite D'harhan's incredible firepower, he knew Fett was the greater threat. Of the two of them, Fett had the cunning.

Above, struts held the roof in place. A series of arcing flexible durasteel supports crisscrossed the high space. Half of the roof had been blasted off when Fett had fired the concussion missile.

The support arches would be an excellent place to stage a battle. Fett had his jetpack, but D'harhan would be at a disadvantage. He would have to remain on the ground.

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Obi-Wan pointed with his chin. “Can you make it?” he asked Ferus, indicating the gridwork above.

Ferus grinned. “Can a bantha fly?”

“Actually, no.”

“You’re such a stickler for details, Obi-Wan.”

Suddenly, the Force surged, and Obi-Wan heard a slight whine. D’harhan had released another blast from his laser cannon. The cruiser under repair suffered a direct hit. Flames blew back toward Obi-Wan and Ferus, and they leaped to avoid them.

It was just what Boba Fett was waiting for. Obi-Wan’s lightsaber danced, deflecting the bounty hunter’s blaster fire as Obi-Wan leaped to safety on a strut high above. Ferus landed on a ship next to the now-destroyed cruiser, then used the momentum of his jump to make a second leap, calling on the Force this time. He sailed into the air, his fingertips grazing the lowermost beam. Obi-Wan saw panic in his eyes. He reached down and grabbed Ferus’s wrist, then hauled him up.

Boba Fett moved quickly, activating the propellants on his jetpack and zooming into the air, firing as he came. Deflecting the bolts, Obi-Wan took up the rear as he and Ferus raced to the roof opening.

Ferus had his own crude weaponry to employ. He reached into his pocket, then tossed something at Fett, a shining disk that spun in a clean line, straight toward him. Fett dodged, but the disk hit his armor near the shoulder, searing a crack into the surface. Obi-Wan realized that Ferus had filled his pockets with the round laser cutting blades that fit into a servocutter tool. He tossed another and another, and Fett had a hard time dodging them. With every burst from his jetpack, he zoomed perilously close to the beams.

Silently congratulating Ferus for his inventiveness, Obi-Wan reversed course and charged toward the careening Fett, swinging his lightsaber over his head as he ran. He pinpointed the bolts that held the sheets of durasteel in place for the roof, hitting each

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one with a quick, cutting touch in a careful pattern. Now all D'harhan had to do was cooperate.

The cyborg was nothing if not predictable. Obi-Wan saw his laser cannon revolve as it followed him. The red tracking light began to pulse.

Boba Fett instantly knew what was going to happen. Obi-Wan saw a new urgency in his attempts to dodge Ferus's spinning laser cuttings as he dove down to stop D'harhan.

He was too late. The cannonfire streaked toward them. Obi-Wan had anticipated it and swung on a beam, flying through the air toward the rear of the hangar. Ferus was close on his heels.

The firepower ripped into the roof where Obi-Wan had been. The bolts had all been cut by the lightsaber on this particular panel, and the thin durasteel peeled back like the rind of a fruit, falling toward the floor below.

Boba Fett made it to safety, but D'harhan was caught. The falling durasteel panel hit him squarely on the back, crashing him to the ground and pinning his legs.

Obi-Wan and Ferus dropped to the floor below. Swinging his lightsaber, Obi-Wan advanced on Fett. Ferus took shelter behind the various ships, trying to get behind Boba Fett so they could corner him. With D'harhan temporarily out of commission, this would be their best chance to stop Fett.

Unfortunately the damage had not gone unnoticed by the spaceport security. A fight among pilots was one thing, property damage another. Suddenly speeders soared into the space, piloted by security officers armed with blaster rifles. Fett was their first target, and they headed for him. The bounty hunter now had his hands full as he turned to meet their assault.

With a quick swipe, Obi-Wan destroyed the control panel on D'harhan's laser cannon. The cyborg's usual smile was now a grimace. His expressionless voice was hoarse. "You think you've won, don't you. But we don't lose. One day you'll be another Jedi prisoner on Coruscant. Malorum has his ways."

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Blaster fire suddenly ripped into the ground next to them. More security officers had arrived.

“Don’t move,” an amplified voice said.

As Ferus joined them, D’harhan’s grin grew wider. “Now we’ll all be in prison together.”

Ferus leaned down. “We’re not going anywhere with you, you slab of circuit parts.”

Obi-Wan heard the hum of an engine. He saw through the partially open door that a space cruiser had jockeyed out of the line and was edging toward the hangar.

Trever.

Ferus saw him, too. “Time to catch the air taxi,” he said.

They raced toward the ship. Trever spun it around and released the landing ramp even as he began to rise in the air. With a flying leap, Obi-Wan and Ferus hit the ramp and pulled themselves onboard.

Blaster bolts peppered the closing ramp as they ran up into the belly of the ship. They reached the cockpit just as Trever sent the cruiser screaming above the spaceport.

As they streaked up into the atmosphere, the Red Twins dwindled into two pulsating crimson dots, then just a single reddish glow.

“Nice driving, kid,” Ferus told Trever. “Where’d you get the ship?”

Trever’s face was flushed. “Traded for it while you were dancing around. I figured we’d need a clean getaway.”

“Not so clean,” Obi-Wan said. A glowing light was streaking across the sky.

Boba Fett had escaped to his ship.

Chapter Three

Trever looked at the control panel. “Aw, you’ve got to be kidding me. This guy is really starting to get on my nerves.”

Without taking his eyes from the fighter following them, Obi-Wan said, “We can lose him in hyperspace.”

“Right,” Trever said. “If only we had a hyperdrive.”

Ferus rotated and fixed Trever with an incredulous look. “You didn’t trade for a ship with a hyperdrive?”

“I didn’t have much time, you know,” Trever protested.

“We’re at the edge of the Outer Rim,” Ferus said. “Every ship has a hyperdrive out here. Except the one we’re on.”

“I didn’t see you being choosy when I came to rescue you,” Trever shot back.

“If you two don’t mind a suggestion,” Obi-Wan said. “The what-ifs aren’t helping. Fett is gaining.”

Ferus was starting to hate it when Obi-Wan was right. “You want me to take over?” he asked, pointing to the controls.

“Sure.” Obi-Wan crossed to the nav computer. “I hate flying. And, Trever, I think this might be a little beyond your experience.”

Ferus took over the controls. He wondered about his own experience. For the past few years he’d been living quietly on Bellassa, trying to put his Jedi past behind him. The decision to

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leave had been the hardest one he'd ever made, and it had haunted him every day and every night. He'd let his rival, Anakin Skywalker, push him into leaving. He'd left behind a life of missions and meaning for...isolation. He and his friend Roan had lived quietly—until the rise of the Empire had turned them into Rebels. Ferus had found his cause once more. And he had vowed to stick to it this time, until the Empire was defeated. Roan was lost now, Bellassa a new part of his past. Once more, Ferus found himself on the path of a Jedi—but unsure whether it was a path he was allowed to take.

He pushed the speed, then dropped back, trying to get a feel for the unfamiliar engines. "I'm just going to have to outfly him."

Obi-Wan cast an uneasy glance out the cockpit window. "I have confidence in your piloting skills, Ferus, but I've seen this Firespray in action. For a small ship, it's impressive. Don't let it fool you. In addition to those blaster cannons, it has laser cannons and seismic minelayers."

"Piece of sweetcake," Trever said, but he looked pale as he saw how quickly Fett was gaining on them. "Don't you want to speed up?" he asked Ferus nervously.

"We know he can outrun us," Ferus pointed out. "The only way we're going to win this is if we're able to outmaneuver him."

Obi-Wan studied the star map. "Let me see if I can find an asteroid shower to hide in or a dense nebula," Obi-Wan said. "We need to play hide-and-seek."

They were almost within firing distance now. Obi-Wan quickly flipped through the different quadrants on the nav computer. "There's a dense nebula close by. All uninhabited star clusters. If we can manage to hold on, we can make it in a few minutes."

The armored plating on Boba Fett's ship slid back and the laser cannon sprang to life. Streaks of light headed toward them. Ferus went into a steep dive even as Fett put on speed, zooming toward them.

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"I didn't think he'd be...quite this fast," Ferus said, pushing the speed and making a hard right.

The cannonfire just missed them. Another barrage flew in their direction.

Ferus tumbled and turned the ship, spinning and diving. Trever was slammed against the console and quickly leaped into a seat in order to grab the armrests.

They were in a race now, a race they couldn't possibly win. The attack sent shock waves that buffeted the ship, rocking it. It shook so hard that Obi-Wan was afraid it would break apart. He felt his teeth rattle.

"We'd better get there soon," Ferus said. "We're running out of fuel."

"He said he'd just refilled it!" Trever protested.

"Never trust a pilot, kid," Ferus said.

The cannon fired again, and though Ferus went into a dive, the ship quaked as it was struck. Fett followed up the cannonfire with a targeting torpedo.

"Hang on!" Ferus shouted.

The ship dived, then looped up. The torpedo followed, tracking them precisely.

"This is a cargo ship, right?" Obi-Wan asked Trever. The boy nodded. "Release the cargo."

Trever flipped the switch. The cargo bay opened and spilled out empty bins and boxes. At the same moment, Ferus pushed the ship into another steep dive. The torpedo's tracking device followed the cargo instead.

"That'll only work once," Ferus said. "And we've got a problem. I don't think the power systems are used to getting knocked around like this. We have some yellow warning lights flashing. Our systems are failing."

"Nebulae coming up!" Trever shouted.

It wasn't a moment too soon. Ferus counted off the seconds as Fett pounded behind them. The Force filled the cabin. In times of need, Ferus was able to access it and use it—that had

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never fully gone away. He felt it move through him, and he relaxed his grip on the controls. Once, he had based his life on trusting the Force. He had to remember to do that again.

The ship suddenly entered a tunnel of tiny stars rotating around a central energy core. Golden light filled the ship, and the atmospheric disturbance caused it to bounce alarmingly. “Hang on!” Ferus shouted. He maneuvered the cruiser so that it rode the currents, rotating as it jolted from one edge of the star corridor to the other. “How long will we be in this?” he barked to Obi-Wan.

“Not long. We’re on the edge of an unstable current, but it’s moving fast away from us.”

Fett followed, not giving up, just as intrepid as Ferus—and just as willing to push his ship.

Obi-Wan hung on to the console as he studied the star map. There was incomplete information here, gaps in the mapping, no doubt because of the volatility of the atmosphere. “It looks like there’s a planet called Deneter up ahead. It was abandoned after the Clone Wars—it was so decimated by battles that the population emigrated to the Core. It has twenty orbiting uninhabited satellites.” He shouted out the coordinates to Ferus. They might be able to lose Fett among the satellites.

They passed through the star tunnel and into the planet’s atmosphere. Ferus pushed the ship, zooming from one satellite to another, lurking behind one to zoom out behind the next. Boba Fett stayed on their tail, blasting his cannons.

“This isn’t working,” Obi-Wan said. “We can’t shake him.”

“I’m not out of tricks yet,” Ferus muttered, hoping it was true. “Trevor, remember your gravsled action?”

On the streets of Ussa, Trevor had used the unwieldy gravsled like an airspeeder, pushing its capabilities in order to evade Empire security. “Which action?” Trevor asked, his eyes on Fett’s ship.

“The one where you pretend to spin out, and then recover and zoom off?” Ferus said.

“Yeah. Worked every time.”

“How’d you do it?”

“Well, it takes a certain touch,” Trever said. “And an extra boost on the stabilizers.”

“I’ll need a boost from another system,” Ferus said. “Can you patch in some power from the hydraulics?”

“Wait a second,” Obi-Wan said. “That could leave us without enough braking power to land.”

Another barrage of cannonfire sent the ship into a steep dive. This time, the blast hit them in the rear. The ship careened out of control for several long, agonizing seconds while Ferus fought to stabilize. At last, with a great groan, the ship righted itself.

“Then again,” Obi-Wan said, “we can worry about landing when the time comes.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Ferus said through gritted teeth.

Trever dived to the floor and wrenched open the engine panel. He leaped inside the small space. “I don’t have much experience with sublight engines, but...” They heard muttering and clanking. “Got it!” Trever shouted from below.

“Okay, everyone,” Ferus said. “When I say ‘hang on,’ I really mean it this time.”

Ferus speeded up, pushing the engines past maximum now. A slight wobble on the wings told them the ship was at the edge of its control. “Here we go,” he muttered. The ship began to list, as though he’d lost control of the left engine. Dizzily, it spun, falling now through space, straight toward the asteroid. Fett followed, no doubt to record their death spiral...and hasten their end. Laser cannons streaked their firepower through the atmosphere, but they were traveling too erratically for any of the targeting computers to get a fix on them.

The surface of the satellite loomed. At the last moment, Ferus pulled the ship out, its control centers screaming with the effort. Fett zoomed past them. Now *he* was the one fighting for control. They watched as his ship careened close to the surface. Fett had no choice but to crash-land.

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There was a small bloom of fire, and they saw smoke rise.

Obi-Wan studied the life-form sensor. “He’s evacuated the ship. It’s not destroyed, but its not going anywhere soon.”

Ferus soared back up into the atmosphere. “I hope that’s the last we see of him,” he said. “But somehow I don’t think so. Now, I’m afraid, we have our own landing problem to deal with.”

Chapter Four

They didn't have many choices. They could land on the uninhabited planet, but they'd be a little too close to Boba Fett for comfort. Besides, they had no reason to think they'd be able to scavenge fuel to get back off.

"We've got one chance," Obi-Wan said as he scanned the nav computer. "The computer is showing we don't have enough fuel to make it, but we might be able to eke out a few more kilometers than the computer shows. It's a fairly large planet; so there's bound to be an orbit dock or an orbiting shipyard. It's called Acherin."

"Sounds familiar," Ferus said.

"It was where one of the last sieges of the Clone Wars took place," Obi-Wan said briefly. The name of the planet brought a heavy load to his heart. His friend Garen Muln had been Commander of the Republic forces on Acherin—and had presumably died there on that awful day when the clone troopers had turned against the Jedi, slaughtering their former generals on the order of the Sith Lord who was now Emperor.

"Plug in the coordinates," Ferus said. "It's our only shot."

There was nothing to do now but hope that the fuel would hold out. As they spun through space, they tried not to tick off

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the kilometers in their heads. Finally, they approached the planet, a violet-tinged haze in the distance.

Obi-Wan worked the comm unit, trying to raise a response. “This is strange,” he said. “I can’t get an answer. Not only that, but there’s no chatter on the open lines.”

“That *is* strange,” Ferus said. “Keep trying. Is there some kind of atmospheric disturbance in the air?”

“No. They have a dense inner atmosphere, but nothing that should block communications.”

“We’re going to have to enter their atmosphere,” Ferus said. “I hate to enter anyplace without permission these days, but we have no choice.”

He pulled back on speed as they approached Acherin.

“What’s that?” Trever asked, pointing to some orange streaks in the sky.

“Could be some naturally occurring cosmic gas,” Obi-Wan said.

“But we’re in the inner atmosphere,” Trever said.

Ferus immediately started turning the ship. “In certain conditions, like a dense atmosphere, the after-burn of a missile can leave—”

A sudden streak crossed the sky. This time, they knew exactly what it was.

“That’s cannonfire,” Obi-Wan said. “But what—”

Suddenly, an imposing fleet of assault ships appeared, heading directly toward them.

“The Empire,” Trever said.

Fighters took off from one of the assault ships—chasing a trio of small starfighters that now shot across the sky. The Imperial fighters began to chase the three renegades.

Ferus swallowed. “Great. Out of all the planets in the galaxy, we have to pick one in the middle of a war.”

“We’re going to have to land,” Obi-Wan said. He quickly accessed the surface mapping systems. “Just put it down—we’re

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nowhere near a spaceport, and we don't want to blunder into the Empire's hands anyway."

Quickly Obi-Wan scanned the topographical sensors. "There's an area below in a canyon that would give us plenty of cover." He gave Ferus the coordinates.

Suddenly, one of the renegade starfighters peeled off from the others. It bore down on them, flying so close its belly almost scraped the roof of their craft.

"It's forcing me down!" Ferus shouted. "What's going on?"

"And it's drawing fire," Obi-Wan added. "It's alerted the Empire to our position."

"Yeah, this just keeps getting better."

They screamed down through the sky. The surface of the planet loomed.

"I can't hold this course," Ferus said.

Cannonfire shook the ship.

The ship on top of them was hit. Smoke suddenly obscured their vision.

"We're going to crash-land!" Ferus shouted, wrestling with the controls.

With a horrible groaning sound, the ship hit ground and skidded on rock. Ferus controlled the landing, but the battering it received from the rocks took its toll. It came to rest on one side, metal screaming against the rough ground.

They activated the landing ramp, which only opened partway. Ferus searched the pilot's compartment and found an old blaster, which he held in his hand as he led the way out.

A short distance away, the pilot of the renegade starfighter had emerged from its canopy—with a blaster at the ready.

Blaster fire streaked toward them, trying to pin them in one small area.

"Don't move!" the pilot shouted. "If you move, you're dead."

Chapter Five

The helmeted pilot stood on the hull of the ship, casually balanced, with both hands on the blaster. Obi-Wan reached out a hand and Force-pushed. The pilot stumbled back...as Ferus raised his own blaster and Obi-Wan leaped forward to place the blade of his lightsaber above the pilot's neck.

The pilot looked up with wide, dark blue eyes.

"Well," she said, "what do you know. A Jedi."

"Who are you?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Raina Quill. I'm a commander in the Acherin resistance. Pleased to make your acquaintance. That is, if you could manage to take your lightsaber off my neck."

She was a humanoid woman of about Ferus's age. Her gaze seemed friendly, if intense, but Obi-Wan wasn't about to let her free yet.

"Why did you force us down?"

"Because you were about to land in the middle of enemy-controlled territory, right within range of a turbolaser. I had a feeling you wouldn't like that. Hey, I thought all the Jedi were dead."

Obi-Wan deactivated his lightsaber. "Not all."

"Apparently." She gingerly came to a sitting position. "Ow. As it is, we're still behind enemy lines. And I have a feeling those

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starfighters didn't lose us. They had better things to do. But I bet they broadcast our landing site to the ground army."

"Who's the enemy?" Ferus asked.

"The Empire, of course," she said.

"But you were a Separatist planet."

Raina rose to her feet and took off her helmet, shaking out a long auburn braid. "That doesn't mean we support the Empire. We wanted the right to secede from the Republic, not to turn the galaxy into a place of absolute power. Now we've got an Emperor breathing down our necks. Anyway, we were negotiating a truce with the Republic army when the Clone Wars ended. After we got a look at the Empire, we decided to call off the truce and keep fighting instead."

"So how's it going?" Trever asked.

"We've been fighting for almost a year," she said. "They thought they'd crush us in a matter of weeks. But they can't let us win. We know that. We're making a last stand in our ancient city of Eluthan. We've got our army concentrated there. It's a walled city, and we've evacuated most of the civilians. We should try to get there as quickly as we can. And," she added with a rueful glance at their ships, "I'm afraid we have to walk."

"Did you know the Commander of the Republic Forces?" Obi-Wan asked her.

"Garen Muln? Yes, I met him once, when we were negotiating the truce. But you should talk to our commander, Toma. He dealt with Muln. He was with him on that last day...the day the Chancellor said that all Jedi were enemies."

The day of the slaughter. Obi-Wan felt Ferus glance at him. Ferus knew Garen had been Obi-Wan's good friend. Ferus had met him as an apprentice, in what he still thought of as his previous life.

"Look, we'd better get to Eluthan," Raina continued. "You can talk to Toma there."

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan and Ferus exchanged a glance. They really didn't have any choice. They needed a ship to get off-planet, and Raina was their best bet to find one.

They looked at Trever, and he shrugged. "I guess I'm along for the ride."

"We'd better get going," Raina urged.

They followed her through the canyon into a dense wood. "Much of Acherin is open land," she told them. "We only have three cities. Eluthan is the center of our culture. We fortified it heavily during the Clone Wars and we have a shield operating. That's why we've retreated there."

They walked quickly for several kilometers. Ferus tossed a pack of protein pellets to Trever. He could see that the boy was tiring.

"We only have a few kilometers to go," Raina said in a low tone. "The Empire has ringed the outskirts of the city with their army. We might run into some droid scouts. With any luck we can slip through. I know some shortcuts."

They picked up their pace, close to running now. They came to a vast open field studded with massive standing stones, some of them hundreds of meters high. In the distance, a walled city loomed. It was built on a plateau, and the thick stone walls rose against a bleak yellow sky. It had been designed for fortification, but it was clear that the makers had an eye for beauty, too. The stone was laid in a pattern, and the contrasting grays and dark blues seemed to make up a sculpture of weathered stone and deep colors. There was a grandeur about it that made Obi-Wan and Ferus stop in their tracks.

Raina noticed their reaction. "It is our treasure," she said simply. "And we believe it will protect us from anything."

Not the Empire, Obi-Wan thought.

Suddenly a high whine cut through the air.

"It's a compact assault vehicle," Raina said. "Follow me."

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They ran behind her to enter a dense area of the standing stones. They stood, their backs to the stone, while the CAV approached, a droid piloting it.

Obi-Wan knew the vehicles. They were small and agile, but prone to sensor jamming. He assumed that the Empire was using them primarily for surveillance in this area. One droid could cover a great deal of territory, and the vehicle was equipped with a medium-sized blaster cannon.

The CAV sped past.

“There’ll be more,” Raina said.

They moved on. They went from the shelter of stone to stone, making slower progress now. Every so often a CAV would speed past, its droid pilot aiming a surveillance probe into the air. They were able to evade it each time...

...until they stumbled on a small squad of heavily armed droids. This time, there was no hiding. They heard the metallic click as the droids snapped into attack position.

Blaster fire erupted from the droid squad. Raina reached for the two blasters strapped across her chest and kept up a steady barrage as Ferus charged. Obi-Wan took out his lightsaber and went after the left flank, while Ferus charged toward the right. Obi-Wan sliced off the head of a droid and used his backswing to disable the control sensor suite of another. Ferus flew through the air and executed a diving roundhouse kick, somehow slipping through the streaks of blaster fire without catching any of it.

The other two droids retreated behind a tall standing stone and began peppering them with blaster bolts.

“Here come the reinforcements.” Raina pointed into the distance with her chin, where CAVs were approaching. “If you can dispatch those two, I can get to an open area and activate a smoke grenade. The wind is southeast—it will carry most of the smoke toward the CAVs. I can get us through the smoke to the secret entrance in the wall. That way they won’t lock on our position.”

Jude Watson

“Done.” Obi-Wan summoned the Force and leaped to the top of one of the smaller standing stones. He jumped from one to another until he had the droids in view. Then he dropped behind them. Before they had a chance to turn and fire, two strokes of the lightsaber turned them into scrap.

Raina raced to the open area and aimed the smoke grenade. She was still out of range of the cannons on the CAVs. The grenade flew through the air. Thick, acrid smoke billowed out and spread back toward the CAVs. Obi-Wan quickly ran back to the group.

The wind carried much of the smoke away from them, but they still had to make their way through it, their eyes streaming. They followed the metallic sheen of Raina’s armor as she led them through the smoke. When they arrived at what looked like a sheer wall, she pressed several stones in what appeared to be a random pattern. One large stone slid out.

She motioned them inside.

“Welcome to Eluthan,” she said.

Chapter Six

They walked through the narrow deserted streets. The city wasn't laid out in a grid, but in a random pattern, streets and alleys turning and ascending and descending the hilly terrain. The houses were made of mellow bronze stone, and were only a few stories tall.

"Most of the citizens have evacuated," Raina explained. "This is pretty much just an army base now. But once it was a thriving city."

They walked to a sprawling stone building on the edge of a grassy plaza. The plaza now served as a landing platform for the ships. A plastoid roof sheltered it and connected it to the building.

"This used to be a school," Raina said. "Many of the students joined the resistance, and the rest offered the building as a base for operations. Most Acherins are totally devoted to this cause. We didn't have to ask for sacrifices. They offered them."

Trever smirked. "Or maybe they just wanted to get out of classes."

Raina didn't take offense; she laughed. "Maybe."

Obi-Wan looked around at the low, stately building, the expanse of grass that had once thrived and now was brown and seared with the scorch of after-burn and the trampling of boots.

Jude Watson

Once, boys and girls had run through this grass, had studied at this school.

Odd how much he hated war, yet how much of his life had been spent around it.

Raina nodded at a guard standing outside the double doors, and she and her guests were allowed in. She quickly led the way to the command center, a circular hall in the middle of the building. It had once been a gathering place for students, Obi-Wan guessed. Now it had been outfitted with vidscreens and computer banks.

A tall man with a shaved head saw them enter. His face was impassive, but Obi-Wan noted how his body relaxed and his gray gaze cleared when he saw Raina. Obi-Wan guessed this was Toma.

“We thought you were shot down,” the tall man said.

“They tried,” Raina said. “I lost my ship. But I met some friends.” She introduced them.

Toma looked at Obi-Wan searchingly. “I am glad to meet a Jedi.”

“You knew Garen Muln.”

“Yes, we—”

Suddenly the command screen lit up with pulsating lights. Toma turned and regarded the screen. “The counterattack has begun. The Empire has our fleet surrounded. We need to scramble all pilots back up there.”

“I’m ready,” Raina said. “All I need is another ship.”

To Obi-Wan’s surprise, Ferus spoke up.

“I’d like to offer my services,” he said. “Any chance to take a whack at the Empire, I’m for it.”

“We could use your help,” Toma said. “Raina, can you find our friend a ship?”

“Ferus...” Obi-Wan said, but he didn’t know how to finish the thought. He couldn’t forbid Ferus to go. That wasn’t his place. Ferus wasn’t his Padawan.

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He would remain here. This was not his fight. He could never forget that his duty was to Luke and Leia. He could take no unnecessary risks.

"Don't fret, Obi-Wan. I'll just do a little damage and come back to get you," Ferus said easily.

"I want to go," Trever said.

"Sorry, kid," Ferus said. "Not this time."

"I'm really getting tired of being left behind."

"I don't think stowaways have a choice," Ferus said.

Toma turned to Obi-Wan. "Will you watch the battle with me? Your advice will be appreciated. I have great respect for the Jedi."

Obi-Wan bowed his head. He would be happy to offer advice, but his heart was heavy. He knew this effort was doomed. Ferus saw his feeling in the Jedi's eyes, and turned abruptly to go with Raina.

Toma began barking out orders to his pilots. Obi-Wan took a moment to familiarize himself with the pattern on the large, square screen on the wall.

"Your left flank is weak," he told Toma. "In battles like this, many commanders like to use pincer movements. They have the superior numbers. You have to fly through them, not around them. It's more dangerous, but it's also more effective."

Toma nodded. He spoke into the comlink, translating Obi-Wan's words into specific ship movements. The dots on the screen reassembled.

Toma pointed to two moving dots, each with a different number code. "That is Raina and Ferus. They've taken off."

Obi-Wan kept his eyes on them. Ferus had made his decision, but Obi-Wan wished he had stayed here. He suddenly realized how much he was depending on him. He himself had to return to Tatooine, but his consolation was that Ferus would be out in the galaxy, doing what he could, where he could.

He had no more advice to give to Toma. It was clear to him, looking at the screen, that the battle was already lost. The

Jude Watson

Acherins simply did not have enough ships or firepower. He was amazed at the daring pilots and their skill, but one by one the blinking dots disappeared. Toma's face grew ashen.

"We are losing our best," he said.

"They can't hold out," Obi-Wan said gently.

"We didn't dare to hope that we'd beat them," Toma said. "We hoped we would be enough of a nuisance that they'd just go away."

"They never just go away," Obi-Wan said. "Their reach is a stranglehold. They won't let go."

"If I pull the pilots back, it's over," Toma said. "I will have to surrender Eluthan."

"If it must be done, it should be done," Obi-Wan said.

Toma spoke into his comm unit. "Recalling all pilots," he said. "The battle is lost. Return to base. You have done well, each one of you."

He bowed his head. Obi-Wan watched as Toma struggled with his decision. When he raised his head, his eyes were clear. With Obi-Wan out of view, he contacted the Imperial commander, Admiral Riiwel. Soon Riiwel's face appeared on the screen.

"I am prepared to surrender," Toma said. "I ask for safe passage for my pilots. Acherin agrees to become part of the Empire."

"Do you think after what has happened, after the many deaths of our forces, that this is acceptable?" Admiral Riiwel sneered. "You must pay for your disloyalty. I do not accept your surrender terms. You will surrender on our terms."

"And what are your terms?"

"Annihilation. Eluthan must pay with its own destruction. Prepare for saturation bombing of the city. We have already knocked out your planetary shield."

Toma whirled to check the computer. "No! It is our ancient city, revered by all Acherins, the site of our most precious treasures!"

STAR WARS: Dark Warning

“You should have thought of that before you made it your base.”

The screen went black.

“What have I done?” Toma wondered aloud.

“You haven’t done it,” Obi-Wan said. “They have. You must tell the pilots not to return. They’ll be destroyed.”

“They are almost here...they think they have safe passage...” It was true. The pulses of light were returning. Behind them were the lights of the Imperial destroyers, tailing them. Toma spoke into the comlink. “Do not return to Eluthan! Repeat, do not return! Take evasive action, now!”

Obi-Wan saw the great Empire’s ships fire even as the pilots peeled off. All of them made it, a tribute to the skills of the Acherin pilots. To his dismay, he saw two pulsating lights begin to take evasive action, but not deflect from their course.

“Ferus and Raina are returning here,” he said.

“No,” Toma said in disbelief. “They’ll be slaughtered.”

“Trever, come on—we must get to the spaceport,” Obi-Wan said.

The sounds of explosions came to them now. The Empire was leading a barrage against the city. Toma flipped the image control and they saw scenes of devastation outside as cannons boomed from the destroyers above.

Toma flinched as a large, stately building suddenly disintegrated. “Libraries, museums...our university. How could an invading force do this? They’re targeting them. Why can’t they just allow us to surrender? This is our civilization!”

“It is yours, not theirs,” Obi-Wan said. “So they don’t care about it. All they care about is a display of power. Toma, we must go.”

Toma snapped back into his authority. “There is a hidden landing platform with my personal transport. That is where Raina will be going.”

With a last glance at the screen, Obi-Wan turned. He motioned to Trever. “Stay close to me.”

Jude Watson

“I’m not going to argue with that,” Trever said.

The building shook with the heavy barrage. The thick stones held up, but cracks appeared and dirt rained down on them as they ran down the corridors.

They heard the sound of thudding boots.

“The stormtroopers are here,” Obi-Wan said.

Toma turned down another corridor. The echo of the stormtrooper boots seemed to be everywhere. Obi-Wan focused on the sounds, tuning into the Force to tell him what he needed to know.

“There’s a squad of twenty ahead. But only five behind,” he told the others, reversing direction. “This way.”

“No, we can’t,” Toma said. “That leads to a dead end. We have to go this way.”

Toward twenty stormtroopers? “Oh, well,” Obi-Wan said. “You can’t have everything.”

He charged forward, lightsaber in hand. Toma was at his side with his blaster ready.

Trever called out in a whisper. “Wait!”

Obi-Wan paused impatiently. Trever had opened up a closet marked **ATHLETIC EQUIPMENT**. He took out a box of laserballs.

“Let me go first. I’ll give you the edge you need.”

Obi-Wan hesitated. “Trever, I’m not sure about this.”

“Trust me.”

There was no time to argue. The stormtroopers were approaching.

Obi-Wan stood near Trever, poised to protect him. As the footsteps grew closer, he nodded at Trever.

The stormtroopers appeared, rounding the corner, moving quickly in lockstep. With a flick of his wrist, Trever sent six laserballs shooting down the corridor, centimeters above the floor.

Flick. Flick. Flick. Trever’s action was so fast it was almost a blur. More laserballs zoomed down the hallway.

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At first, the stormtroopers were just confused. Then they tried to evade the laserballs, but one got tangled up and started to fall. Another crashed into one on his left. Before long, they were colliding, trying to keep their balance and shooting at Obi-Wan and the others at the same time. Blaster bolts pinged through the air and hit the walls and ceiling.

Obi-Wan leaped directly into their midst. While Toma came at them on the right with his blaster, Obi-Wan's lightsaber danced. Within seconds the entire squad had been demolished.

"Thanks for the edge," Toma told Trever.

They continued on. Toma led them through a narrow passage to a small hangar with one ship. He flicked on a vidscreen. The sky outside was thick with Imperial starfighters. "We're underground now. I can activate the opening when we see Ferus and Raina," he said. "It's concealed in the side of the building."

Obi-Wan looked at the ship. It was a battered star cruiser with dull gray plating.

"I know," Toma said. "It doesn't look like much. It's not supposed to. But it's got a tweaked hyperdrive engine and all the firepower you could want."

"Look!" Trever called, pointing to the vidscreen.

Two ships were spinning and diving, cartwheeling through the air as cannonfire streaked around them. Smoke was spiraling out from one of the ships. Obi-Wan didn't know whether it was Ferus's or Raina's.

Toma pressed a switch as they dove in a straight line toward the surface. At the very moment it seemed they would crash into the city, they veered off. Part of the ceiling overhead slid back, and they dropped into the hangar.

Raina quickly popped her cockpit canopy and leaped out as her ship exploded into flames. Toma and Trever took a step back from the heat, but Obi-Wan raced toward Ferus's ship. Why hadn't Ferus opened the cockpit canopy?

He looked down into the transparent bubble. Ferus was working at the canopy manually with a vibrocutter. When he saw

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan, he stepped back. Obi-Wan used his lightsaber, and the cockpit canopy peeled back. Ferus leaped out.

"I lost all systems in that last dive," he said. "Even the manual control blinked out. Thanks for the help."

Stormtroopers poured into the hangar, firing as they came. Obi-Wan deflected the fire with his lightsaber as they ran toward the remaining ship. Raina leaped aboard and started the engines. Toma helped Trever up the ramp.

Ferus and Obi-Wan turned their attention to the stormtroopers. Obi-Wan deflected fire and used the Force to push several stormtroopers backward, knocking them into the formation and sending several of them tumbling, hampered by their armor.

Obi-Wan and Ferus took advantage of this to jump aboard. The ship lifted off and streaked outside. Dodging cannonfire, Raina guided the ship through the smoking city.

"I can't believe it," Raina cried. "I can't believe they're destroying the city!"

But she didn't have time for reflection. Starfighters were chasing them, hammering at them with cannonfire.

"They've locked a missile on our position," Obi-Wan called.

"I've got to take us through the standing stones," Raina said.

"Isn't this ship a little big?" Ferus asked. "There's no room to maneuver."

"I've done it before on a training exercise," Raina assured him.

"That was in a starfighter," Toma pointed out. "And you crashed your ship."

"Is he kidding?" Trever asked.

Raina shook her head. "Toma never kids."

"Oh, good." Trever gulped.

Raina flew over the walls that circled the city. She dove down into the canyon of standing stones. She did it so fast that the torpedo crashed into a standing stone with a roar.

STAR WARS: Dark Warning

Obi-Wan gripped the console as a giant stone came at them. Raina flipped the ship sideways, then zoomed around another stone.

It's almost like flying with Anakin, Obi-Wan thought. For a second, this made him happy. Then he remembered the rest of it, and it pierced him. *Anakin.*

The starfighters overhead dipped down to follow them. One of them tipped a wing into a stone and spiraled out in a fiery crash. The spaces between the stones were so narrow that their starship barely made it through, even when Raina tipped them sideways.

Most of the starfighters gave up and lurked above in airspace, waiting for them to emerge. But one determined pilot swooped behind them. It was a race now, and Raina's face was set with determination. She headed straight for a narrow opening between two standing stones.

"You'll never make that one," Obi-Wan said. Inwardly he thought, *I really do hate flying.*

Raina didn't answer. It seemed as if she meant to kill them all. She still headed for the opening at top speed, the starship behind her screaming through the stone field.

At the last moment, she dove to the ground and cut her speed. Obi-Wan didn't think any ship could handle such a maneuver without stalling out, but this one did. With a great shudder, it hovered only meters off the ground. The starship tried to flip sideways and make the opening between the two stones, but the pilot must have been distracted by Raina's sudden maneuver. It crashed headlong into the stone.

Raina gently eased the ship close to ground level through the rest of the stone field. They were reaching the end of the canyon, and the standing stones were farther apart now.

"The starfighters are still up there," Ferus said, his eyes on the nav screen.

Obi-Wan watched Raina. She was going so slowly. Why?

Jude Watson

The sun was slipping down in the sky. Suddenly it hit the stones and lit them with orange fire.

“We call this the flames of Eluthan,” Toma said.

At the same time that the stones lit up, the canyon walls surrounding them went deep black with shadow. Raina put on a burst of speed and entered the canyon, losing herself in the shadows.

“This ship has a cloaking device,” Toma explained to the others. “It drains a lot of power, so we can’t use it for long. In the meantime, we’ll make it hard for them to get a visual sighting.”

Raina did some amazing flying, pushing the speed and hugging the contours of the canyon wall.

Trever was impressed. “If you ever want to give piloting lessons, sign me up,” he said.

Raina only nodded for an answer. Her face was set in grim lines. She knew how slim their chances were to outrun and outfox a squad of Imperial starfighters.

Wide navy blue sky loomed ahead. They were almost out of the canyon. Raina shot out into the dusky sky and headed up into the outer atmosphere, now pushing the speed to maximum.

“We made it!” Trever crowed.

“We’re losing the cloaking device,” Raina said.

“Just a few...more...seconds,” Toma said, scanning the sky.

But Obi-Wan’s eyes were on the screen. He saw the blinking dots reverse direction.

“They’ve spotted us,” he said.

Chapter Seven

The starfighters were gaining on them. The first missile streaked from the lead starfighter.

Raina pushed the craft left, then right, leading them on a zigzagging path that made them dizzy. The missile zoomed past them on the right.

“Any volunteers for the gun pods?” Toma asked. He flipped a switch, and gun stations opened up below the cockpit.

Ferus and Obi-Wan ran to the forward gun pods and strapped themselves behind the guns. They waited until the starfighters came into range. Ferus felt the Force gather and grow as they pounded the starfighters behind them.

But the starfighters were relentless, and more were sent from the surface. It was clear that the Imperial commanders knew that Toma had escaped on this ship. The starfighters zoomed toward it, grouping and regrouping, and pounding the ship with fire. They took one hit, then another.

“We’ve got to lose them!” Ferus shouted.

Bent over the nav computer, Toma shook his head. “We’re in deep space now. There are no neighboring systems.”

“Hold them off for a minute,” Obi-Wan told Ferus before running back to the cockpit. Ferus watched him out of the corner of his eye. What was he up to?

Jude Watson

"I have an idea," Obi-Wan told Toma. He quickly bent over the nav computer, making a wide search of the area. "On the way to Acherin we were caught in a fast-moving star tunnel. The kind that spins out from a vast atmospheric storm."

"And you want to find the storm?"

Obi-Wan looked up at him. "It's one place to lose the starfighters. We're heavier and more durable. How much do you trust your ship?"

"I trust my ship," Toma said. He glanced at Raina. "I trust my pilot more."

"Here." Obi-Wan found what he was looking for. "If we can hold them off just a little longer, we can make it."

"I'll go to maximum speed," Raina said.

Obi-Wan went back to the gun pods. They kept up a steady barrage of fire. Raina flew fast in a series of dizzying turns and circles.

The ship started to shake alarmingly.

"Coming up on that storm," Toma called. He whistled. "It's a bad one. I've got indications of space shears and shifts."

Space shears could tear apart a class-A cruiser, if a pilot wasn't careful. At the sign of shears, pilots were happy to make detours of thousands of kilometers if they had to.

"We can still get around it," Toma said.

Raina gritted her teeth. "No. This is the only way to shake them. Obi-Wan is right."

They flew straight into the atmospheric storm. The jouncing of the ship turned into a violent bucking.

"She can take it," Toma said to a visibly nervous Trever. "The ship is double-hulled and triple-bolted. We have backups on every system. I built this myself during the Clone Wars. It's not an ordinary starship."

"This isn't your ordinary storm," Trever said as a space shear hit them broadside.

Trever skidded across the cockpit floor and came to rest against the console. He grabbed it and held on.

STAR WARS: Dark Warning

A current of energy sent them spinning off out of control. Raina went with the spin, letting the ship find its own balance. “The trick with these energy shifts is to fight them as little as possible,” she said.

Ferus had to admire her nerve. The hardest thing for a pilot to do was let the ship take over. Raina watched the indicators, her gaze steady, not interfering with the ship’s attempt to right itself. It did no good to fire the cannons. They were spinning too crazily.

“The starships are retreating,” Ferus called. “They’re more afraid of the storm than they are of their admiral.” *Or else*, he thought privately, *they figure that we’re doomed*.

Raina began to take over the controls again, easing the ship through the buffeting storm. On and on they flew, slammed by currents of energy that sucked them into vortexes and spun them out like droplets of water. The ship staggered and lurched, sometimes close to stalling out the engines. Ferus started to worry when he noticed that Raina looked concerned.

“We’re almost out of it,” Toma called in relief.

The ride smoothed out, but suddenly they could see nothing. It was as though a curtain had dropped over the cockpit windscreen. They had entered an atmospheric cloud so dense that space outside was just a gray, roiling mass.

“Even the sensors can’t penetrate this,” Raina said. “I can’t get any readings. There must be some sort of energy field—”

Suddenly Ferus felt something surge, a warning.

“Ferus...” Obi-Wan said.

“I felt it.” He strained his eyes ahead.

Suddenly an asteroid loomed ahead, seemingly close enough to touch. It had appeared without warning and they were headed straight for it.

“Look out!” Trevor shouted.

Raina pulled back on the speed. Just in time, the craft pulled up, and they zoomed just meters above the pitted surface while she desperately searched for a place to land.

Jude Watson

“There.” Obi-Wan pointed.

Raina skimmed over the rocky ground and gently set the ship down on a large, flat rock.

Raina peered through the cockpit canopy. “Where *are* we?”

Toma scanned the nav computer. “This asteroid should have made it onto star maps. It’s large enough, and it has an atmosphere. But there’s no trace of it.”

Obi-Wan activated the canopy and hauled himself up and out. He looked above. The sky was a dense blue haze. He couldn’t see a star.

“I think this asteroid is locked into the force field of the storm,” he said. “It can’t break out, so it travels constantly as the storm travels.”

“And cruisers avoid the storm, so the asteroid isn’t mapped,” Ferus said, hauling himself up and out of the cockpit to stand beside Obi-Wan. “Let’s take a look around.”

They explored the area around the ship, but all they found were craters and dust.

“At least we’re safe,” Raina said. She stretched. “And I could use a rest.”

“Yeah, getting pounded by the Empire’s starfighters and then pulverized by a galactic storm will do that to you,” Trever said. “Not to mention, we missed lunch.”

Raina laughed and slung an arm around Trever. “You’re starting to grow on me, kid.”

“Yeah, just like goblin moss,” Trever said.

Raina and Trever headed off to prepare a shelter. Toma turned to Obi-Wan.

“You have been waiting to speak to me,” he said.

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said. “Tell me about the death of Garen Muln.”

Toma looked startled.

“Death?” he said. “But Garen Muln isn’t dead...he’s alive.”

Chapter Eight

“We were together when it happened,” Toma said. “At our headquarters in Eluthan. We were negotiating the terms of the truce. That didn’t take long, but we were enjoying each other’s company. We had thought we were enemies, but we found we had much in common. Then it happened.”

“The clone troopers,” Obi-Wan said.

“He was in the operations base with me,” Toma said. “We had the vidscreens on, and we saw the clone troopers attack. Like someone had thrown a switch—it was clear they had orders to hunt down Garen and kill anyone who got in their way. He wanted to go out and fight, but it was too late. I had to convince him to stay with me, that I could hide him. And I did. I had a secure place in the volcanic caves outside the city, a place I had created in case the worst happened. I never thought the worst would happen to the man who had once been my enemy, and that I would protect him.”

“Did they search for him?”

“For weeks,” Toma said. “I was interviewed by a special group called the Inquisitors.”

“We’ve heard of them,” Ferus said drily.

“Was one of them named Malorum?” Obi-Wan asked.

Toma shook his head. “No. Why?”

Jude Watson

I guess all roads don't lead to Malorum, Obi-Wan thought. But that didn't make him any less of a threat.

"It's not important," the Jedi said. "Please continue."

This time, Toma nodded. "Finally," he said, "the Inquisitors gave up. They assumed, I think, that he had escaped the planet. Once things had quieted down a little, Garen told me it was time to go. I gave him a ship."

Obi-Wan could not believe what he was hearing. He had grown used to casualty after casualty after casualty. He had walled himself against hope, as a way of keeping away the inevitable disappointment and sadness. Even though he knew there was a slight possibility that Jedi other than himself and Yoda had survived, with every day the possibility had seemed sligher and sligher, until it seemed a mere thread against the whole weight of the Empire.

But now...he felt the hope rise inside his chest, a feeling that was so unfamiliar it felt brand-new. His good friend, Garen. Possibly alive. He was afraid to believe it, but he was desperate for it to be true.

"Do you know where he went?" he asked Toma.

"He was going to make his way to a place called Ilum," Toma said. "He told me that I should only inform another Jedi of this, and they would know why."

Ferus and Obi-Wan exchanged a glance. Ilum was the site of the Crystal Cave, where every Jedi apprentice went to forge his or her own lightsaber. It was sacred to the Jedi.

"Ilum," Ferus said. "Of course." He grew excited. "I never thought of it before. Others could have gone there, too."

"He's probably hiding in the cave," Obi-Wan said, knowing that is what Garen would do: Find a safe place that the Jedi knew better than anyone else.

Toma went to join Raina and Trever and build a shelter. Ferus paced up and down, excited at the news.

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“We have to go there,” he said to Obi-Wan. “Who knows how many Jedi could be there? There could be more of us than we know.”

Ferus didn’t even know what he was saying until the word was in the air. *Us*. This was the truth: Even though he had left the Jedi, he still felt like he was one with them. Not one *of* them, but one *with* them. He could no more disconnect from the Force than he could disconnect from his own thoughts. It was a part of him. He could not deny it. This new hope made the bond even clearer, as if the course of action had shone a spotlight on his attachment.

Obi-Wan did not comment on Ferus’s choice of words, but Ferus could see him taking everything in, just as he always had.

“*You are not here to be punished, least of all by yourself,*” Obi-Wan had told him when he approached the Jedi Council for the last time, to resign from the Order.

“*I must go on living,*” Ferus had responded. “*That is my punishment.*”

He knew Obi-Wan hadn’t wanted him to leave. If he’d been Obi-Wan’s Padawan, it would have all been different. Everything would have been different.

But instead Obi-Wan was left with Anakin, and Ferus was left with nothing. Before he’d exiled himself from the Temple, he’d told Anakin, “*If the Jedi ever need me, I will be there.*”

Now here he was, among the last of the Jedi.

“You remember the caves?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Of course,” Ferus answered. How many times had he and the other Padawans—his friends—talked about the things that happened there, about the tests that would lead to the creation of their lightsabers? His Master, Siri, had taken him there when he was thirteen. She had left him in the caves to fight off his greatest fears—and although it had been terrifying, he had somehow maintained his calm. He made it through, and forged his own blade.

Jude Watson

Then, in what seemed like no time at all, he gave up the lightsaber. Let it go.

But not entirely.

“I can forge a new lightsaber,” he said now, thinking how helpful this would be. “If I can get the crystals, I can do it again.”

Obi-Wan nodded, but he felt hesitant. Ferus was no longer a Jedi. His hold on the Force was growing, but it was still erratic. By the time an apprentice came to the caves at Ilum to find crystals, they were at the peak of their preparation. If Ferus were his Padawan, he would make him wait.

“I know what you’re thinking, Obi-Wan,” Ferus said. “But you are not a Master, and I am not an apprentice.” Ferus’s face was flushed. “You seem locked in an old pattern.”

“I don’t think so,” Obi-Wan answered gently. “The caves are a difficult trial, even for a fully prepared apprentice.”

“I know that. I’ve been through them. I know there are things I’ve forgotten, but I can’t wait until I’ve relearned everything again. Do you really think we can afford to wait? Perhaps Jedi caution is what paved the way for their destruction.”

The accusation stung, but hadn’t Obi-Wan thought the very same thing?

His own caution...it had paved the way for Anakin Skywalker to turn into Darth Vader. He had felt uneasy about his Padawan, but he had never imagined how corrupted he could become. As a Padawan, Ferus had seen something dangerous in Anakin. But Obi-Wan had not done anything about it.

Now he must learn from his mistakes. It was time to be bold.

Obi-Wan was torn. He wanted nothing more than to find his friend Garen alive. But he also knew he had to keep his attention on the real threat—Malorum. On Bellassa they had learned that Malorum had sent an investigator to Polis Massa. Obi-Wan was sure that Luke and Leia’s birth had been covered up completely...but could he be absolutely certain?

Malorum reported to Darth Vader. Was Darth Vader suspicious about Padmé’s death? Was there any path that could

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lead him to find that she had given birth to Luke and Leia before she'd died?

Obi-Wan had to find the answers to those questions. And he wasn't going to find them in exile on Tatooine.

Or, he realized, in the Caves of Illum.

You must follow your feelings, Qui-Gon had said.

And suddenly, Obi-Wan had a feeling that Qui-Gon was with him. Free of the constraints of place, trained in the way of the Whills, Qui-Gon could be right beside him, and Obi-Wan wouldn't know except for the feeling that filled him.

If Luke is to rise, he must have something to join, Qui-Gon's voice said in his mind.

Obi-Wan turned to look in the distance, so Ferus wouldn't see his distraction.

Yes, he answered. *You've told me that already. It is why I left to help Ferus.*

If Luke is to rise, he must be protected from those who seek to do him harm.

So I should go to Polis Massa?

You should follow your feelings.

Obi-Wan knew what that meant. *They lead me there*, he told his Master.

So go.

Obi-Wan felt Qui-Gon move from him as quickly as a breeze. One moment he'd been there, the next, gone. But Obi-Wan's decision had been made. He had to trust Ferus to search for Garen...while he himself had to go to Polis Massa. He had to ensure that Luke and Leia's secret was safe. If Luke was found, then Ferus was doomed, Garen was doomed...they were all doomed to live or die under the Empire. That was what Qui-Gon was telling him.

Ferus had stopped pacing and was watching him. "You don't agree with me."

"I do agree," Obi-Wan said. "You're right. This is your time to be bold. To take the biggest chances."

Jude Watson

Ferus looked relieved. "Besides, you'll be with me in the caves."

Obi-Wan spoke slowly, knowing what he was about to say would be a surprise to Ferus. "No, I won't be. I'm not going with you. There's something else I have to do."

"What could be more important than your friend?" Ferus asked incredulously.

Obi-Wan looked at Ferus, helpless to answer. What could he say? Ferus didn't know that Anakin had become Darth Vader, didn't know that Anakin had fathered two children. These were things Obi-Wan was forbidden to tell him, things that Ferus couldn't know. It would only be a burden to him. It was dangerous for anyone else to know.

"All of our fates," Obi-Wan said. "That is more important."

Ferus was now angry. He could see that. Obi-Wan felt frustration. He couldn't fully confide in Ferus, and that would always be between them. He would have to accept that.

"All right," Ferus said stiffly. "I was hoping to have your help, but I can do it alone."

"I'll take you there," Obi-Wan said. "I can drop you and then return for you. Trever can keep watch, and alert me if something goes wrong. The place I'm going isn't far from Ilum, and I hope my time there won't be long."

Ferus gave a short, angry nod. He did not, however, question Obi-Wan further. Obi-Wan appreciated that.

"I can still help you," Obi-Wan said. "You must be careful. If it seems logical to us that Jedi would go to Ilum, then it is logical to the Empire as well. They will have some kind of presence there. But I know another way to the caves, a secret way."

The anger left Ferus's face. He had accepted it and let it go, just as a Jedi should. Suddenly he was all business, focused on the next stage of the mission. "Good."

"Not so good," Obi-Wan said. "The secret way leads straight through a gorgodon nest."

Chapter Nine

They stood in front of Toma's ship. Obi-Wan looked around at the bleak landscape. "Are you sure you and Raina want to stay?" he asked Toma.

"We're on the Empire's wanted list now," Raina said. "I'd say this was the safest place in the galaxy for us. We packed the ship with supplies and food, just in case we had to make a quick escape. So we'll be okay here...for now."

They spoke lightly, but Obi-Wan knew how much courage it took for them to stay. There was a chance he and Ferus wouldn't be able to find them again.

There was a homing beacon on the ship that they would leave on the asteroid, but there was no guarantee it would work through the atmospheric disturbances surrounding the asteroid. They would test it after they left the atmosphere, but anything could happen.

"We'll return for you," Ferus said. "I'll find you no matter what, I promise you that. And we'll bring back supplies, in case you decide you need to stay for a time."

Raina looked at Trever. "Are you sure you want to go?"

"It's hard to leave all this," Trever said, waving a careless hand. "But yeah."

Jude Watson

He, Obi-Wan, and Ferus boarded the ship. They shot off into space and almost immediately were buffeted by the severe energy storm. Ferus followed the tips he'd gotten from Raina and guided the ship through the energy shifts and shears. The ship jolted and went into a bad roll, but he held on. He was determined to make it through. Toma's ship was the most stable he'd ever flown.

"Homing beacon is holding," Obi-Wan said. "I can access their coordinates."

"Good, we'll be able to get back."

"Sure," Trever shouted as a sudden shift sent them plummeting through space. "If we ever get *out*!"

They flew through the worst of the storm and at last entered calm deep space.

Ferus entered hyperspace in a rush of stars. It would be less than a day's journey to Ilum.

Ferus's disapproval of Obi-Wan's decision hung between them, and they passed most of the journey in silence.

Why was it, Obi-Wan thought, that he could be sure of a decision, yet be torn by its effects?

He was sending Ferus into the caves of Ilum alone, with only Trever to stand watch outside. It would be the test of whether Ferus could truly be a Jedi again. The time for rules was gone. There was no more Jedi Council. There was no one to tell Ferus he wasn't ready.

Obi-Wan remembered his conversation with Qui-Gon back on Tatooine.

Speak of what you know about Ferus, not what you can guess, Qui-Gon had said.

Now Obi-Wan thought, *He was the most gifted apprentice, second only to Anakin. With so many gifts, he is a formidable opponent of the Empire.*

With a lightsaber, with a hold on the Force constantly renewing, constantly strengthening, he would be even stronger.

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To get through the cave alone, to find Garen, to find crystals...it could break him. Or it could make him.

To give in, to trust in another's strength...that was something Obi-Wan had once learned, long ago. Anakin had never learned it. In his arrogance, he had thought that he was the only one who could accomplish the hard things.

But Obi-Wan knew there were times he had to step back and let another go forward. This was one of those times. Even if Ferus never understood, never accepted him.

Even if Ferus failed.

Obi-Wan was at the controls when they reverted to realspace. Ilum lay ahead.

"We'll have to come around on the back side of the planet," Obi-Wan said. "It's good that there's no orbiting surveillance."

"There doesn't have to be," Ferus said. "It's obvious that they don't consider the Jedi a threat."

"Let's get close enough to get a sensor reading," Obi-Wan said. He dipped closer to the planet, pleased at the feel of the controls in his hands. Toma hadn't exaggerated. This was an exceptional ship.

He skimmed low over a glacial lake dotted with icebergs. "I can land on the edge of the lake. Trever can stay here while you hike up the mountain."

Trever looked around dubiously. "Wow. You pick the best spots, Obi-Wan. I can tell this will be fun."

"It'll be better than a nest of gorgodons," Ferus said.

"Is that my only choice?"

"You can always come with me, Trever," Obi-Wan said. "I can leave you someplace safe and come back for you."

He shook his head, as Obi-Wan knew he would. "No, thanks," he said carelessly. "I'm getting used to waiting for Ferus."

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan landed the craft. “It’s not far, but it’s straight up,” he said to Ferus. “Remember, you have to progress past the visions. Don’t let them stop you. Keep going. The crystals lie in the middle of the cave. If Garen is there, that’s where he’ll be.”

Ferus nodded.

“May the Force be with you.”

“And with you.”

Ferus and Trever exited the craft. Obi-Wan took off again. He didn’t look back. He knew the sight of Ferus and Trever dwindling in the distance would cause him pain. He felt fear clutch his heart, a sudden panic that he wouldn’t see them again.

He pushed the speed of the craft toward Polis Massa. Something ticked inside him. Something that told him that he’d better do what he had to do and get back, fast.

Polis Massa was a small mining settlement in the middle of an asteroid field. They had a small but excellent med center, and it was here that the Jedi had found sanctuary for Padmé, at the end of the terrible time when the clone army had turned against the Jedi.

As Obi-Wan descended over the fissured landscape, his heart tightened. He landed Toma’s starship in the docking area and took the horizontal lift tube to the surface, walking through the atmospherically adjusted passageways of the planet’s inhabitants until he arrived at the med center. With every step, he remembered the terrible day when he’d brought Padmé here. He didn’t know she was dying then. He didn’t know how badly Anakin had hurt her. Fear had clutched his heart, but he had believed that Padmé, the strong woman he’d known, would survive.

He waved his hand in front of a sensor and entered a small reception area. The med center was primarily run by droids. A screen blinked, and a droid floated into view.

“Please state the nature of your condition.”

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The nature of my condition is heartbreak.

"I am here to see Maneeli Tuun. Please inform him that it is an old friend."

"Please wait."

The screen blinked off. Obi-Wan paced the confined space. Memories crowded the room, making it seem even smaller. He remembered his helplessness as he carried Padmé inside. He remembered his grief as he watched the Living Force slip from her.

At the end, the med droids did not understand why they couldn't save her, but he had. He believed that Padmé knew her strength was finite. She only had so much left, and no more. And that strength she would give to her children.

She made sure they were born and were healthy. Then—and only then—did she succumb.

He could not do enough for her now. He would fight to his last breath to protect her children. They would someday know of the great courage of their mother.

Obi-Wan and Yoda had barely absorbed the shock of Padmé's death before it was clear to both of them that the best way to ensure the safety of her children was to obliterate any record of their birth. The med droids underwent memory wipes and computer data was expunged. But there was one Polis Massan who Obi-Wan felt he could trust. Maneeli Tuun had been a staunch supporter of the Republic cause and was of unimpeachable character. He had done favors for Yoda over the years and had been one of the reasons Polis Massa had been chosen for the twins' birth. Surely he would help now.

Obi-Wan had no plan yet. He hoped he would find a way to access the med files and make sure that Padmé's records had been erased, just as they'd arranged. That would be the first step.

Maneeli Tuun looked thin and worried when he stepped through the doorway. When he saw Obi-Wan, a look of startled pleasure came over his face but then was replaced by the same frown. "I think I know why you're here. Come."

Jude Watson

Before Obi-Wan could say a word, Tuun led him past the inner door and into the hallway of the complex. “We must be careful,” he said in a low tone. “He’s in the record office.”

“Who?”

“Sancor. Isn’t that why you are here?”

“Who is Sancor?”

“An Inquisitor.”

“I was afraid of that. I didn’t realize he was here.”

Tuun led him into his small office. “First, an investigator came. He never gave his name, but he copied all our records and took them back to Malorum. That was about a month ago. Now this one arrived. He’s an expert on record security. He’s already done an exhaustive search on the memory banks of the med droids, even the ones who weren’t here during that time.”

“Does Malorum know something—does it seem to you that he suspects the truth?”

Tuun shook his head. “I don’t think they know anything, but what they *suspect* is another thing. I know they are determined. Now he’s asked me for the supply records.”

“Why would he want those?” Obi-Wan asked.

“He’s going to check the supply usage as well as waste during the period of time Senator Amidala was here. To see if usage was consistent with the cases.”

Obi-Wan was startled. “Would he be able to tell if births took place?”

Tuun frowned. “He might. There are certain tests we do on newborns. Of course we erased all the records and the memory of the droids, but we didn’t erase all supply records. When our stocks are low, we do refill orders. The babies were checked over and cared for here, so supplies were used...and if he checks various med supplies against patients, he might come up with something. I was just on my way to summon Osh Scal. He’s our Polis Massan supply officer—the Inquisitor wants to question him since he’s one of the few Polis Massans able to speak. I have no choice. I can only hope that he can’t trace anything.”

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Obi-Wan thought quickly. "Has he seen Osh Scal yet?"

"No, he's been in the record office."

"Can you access the supply records here?"

"Of course. I have access to all records." Tuun quickly called up supply records on the screen. "You see? There are hundreds of items to go through. But he seems determined. And don't think I can erase them here. He will be able to trace it."

"I don't want you to erase anything. But what if you add something? Would he be able to trace that?"

"No."

"All right." Obi-Wan quickly sat down at the console. "Say you had a patient here at the same time as Padmé. Someone who was suffering a great wound from a battle. Can you enter supplies that you would need if they developed complications? Medicines? Special healing devices?"

"Of course. But I don't understand."

"Maybe if we give him a bigger fish to catch, he'll become distracted."

Tuun's troubled expression cleared. "So if he thinks he's on the trail of someone the Empire is looking for..."

"Exactly."

"But who?"

"It doesn't matter. We don't need a name. We just need a profile. There are plenty of enemies of the Empire who have gone underground since the end of the Clone Wars, and one of them could have easily fled here. Malorum will try to figure out who it is. The trail will lead nowhere. We just have to plant the seed."

Tuun turned back to the console. "This is sort of brilliant. I think." He keyed in a number of supplies, scrolling through an enormous list. "There. It's buried enough so that he'll have to work to find it. But should we let Osh Scal in on this? He might notice that the supply list is different. He's meticulous."

"No. Sancor hasn't seen him yet. So I'll go."

Jude Watson

Tuun copied the files he'd altered onto a disk and handed it to Obi-Wan.

"Obi-Wan, my friend, you must be careful. The Inquisitor is clever." Tuun ran his hands along his cheeks and blew out a tired breath. "I thought we had thought of everything. I checked and triple-checked. The memory wipes are solid. There is no record of the births. There are no records of yourself or Yoda being here. I didn't imagine they would come digging like this."

"They're doing this because they don't have information, not because they do," Obi-Wan said. "Let's go. Maybe I can do something."

Tuun gave a small smile. "If you can send him back where he came from, that would be great. But if he finds out we altered these files, we could both end up executed."

Chapter Ten

“You’re really leaving me here?” Trever asked, incredulous.

Ferus checked his equipment. “I have to. Only someone who knows how to use the Force can make it through the cave.”

“Who said?”

Ferus sighed. “It will make my job harder if you’re there, Trever. The visions will confuse and frighten you.”

Trever stuck out his chin. “I’m not scared of things that aren’t there.”

“They are there. Trust me. I don’t know if *I* can make it through. And I’m not throwing you into a nest of gorgodons, either. If all goes well, I won’t be long. If it doesn’t go well...wait here for Obi-Wan. And stay out of sight!”

“Stop giving me orders! I’m not a kid!”

“You *are* a kid,” Ferus said. “You’ve seen a lot and done more, but you’re still a kid, and I’m going to protect you when I have to. End of story. Now wait here. If I’m lucky, I’ll come out with Garen Muln and a lightsaber.”

“And if you aren’t lucky, a gorgodon will chew you up and spit you out, and I’ll sweep up the pieces,” Trever shot back.

“Charming,” Ferus said. “Good luck to you, too.”

He turned away. He’d only gone a few steps when Trever called after him.

Jude Watson

“You’d better make it back!”

Smiling slightly, Ferus moved on. Obi-Wan had showed him the route to the gorgodon nest and the back of the cave. He had even given him tips on how to fight a gorgodon, in case he provoked one.

“Watch out for their tails,” Ferus muttered. “And their teeth. And their saliva. And their arms, when they crush you to death.”

Illum was an ice planet, and the snow was as smooth as glass, with an outer layer of permafrost. The air was so cold that he felt as though he’d freeze his lungs with every breath. Ferus had to take small steps and use his liquid cable to haul himself up and over the cliffs.

It was an exhausting climb, and he tried to pace himself despite his eagerness to reach the top. He knew he would need all his strength to meet the gorgodons. He also knew they slept during the day, so he also might make it through the nest without waking them.

As he climbed, he had to shake off a feeling of disbelief that he was here at all. Meeting Obi-Wan again had catapulted him onto a path he hadn’t expected. He had left his adopted homeworld, left his partner Roan, all to go on a quest to save any Jedi he could find. And he wasn’t even a Jedi any longer!

He wasn’t sure what he was anymore. He was a strange creature, half-Jedi, half-man. A space carnival creature for children to point at and laugh, waiting for him to turn into one or the other.

Focus, Ferus, he told himself sternly.

Ferus shot his liquid cable and it pulled him up the remaining hundred meters to the next crag. Thick undulating curtains of ice coated the mountain. Obi-Wan had explained that it would be difficult to pinpoint the location of the gorgodon nest. He would have to use the Force.

Ferus closed his eyes for a moment. It was sometimes an effort for him to clear his mind, to reach out to the Force. Yet using the Force had to be effortless; he could not *try*. He could

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only exist in this moment, not hope for what was to come. He felt in the air the vibrations of the ice, the rock, the molecules of the sky, his own body. They all existed together in one seamless hum of energy, and from them rose what linked him to everything in the galaxy: the Force.

He felt it gather, and he opened his eyes. Immediately he saw that what he thought was a thick impenetrable curtain was actually a constructed wall. The gorgodons had moved the sheer planes of ice as if it were transparisteel, mimicking the steep slope of the crag for camouflage.

Once he saw this, the rest was easy. Ferus saw the difference in blue shadow and curve of ice. There was an opening in the wall, impossible to see even if one were looking carefully. He walked toward it.

The Force gave him no warnings, but he knew the creatures were near. He could sense them. He walked through the opening and stopped short, confused by what was around him. It took him a moment to make sense of the shapes. The gorgodons had made the nest using ice and boulders to construct shelters that looked like the humped backs of the creatures themselves. They were fifty or so meters tall and hunched together like ascending hills. They used their sticky brown saliva as a kind of mortar to hold the structures together. It had an elastic quality and hung down over the openings, looking like a ruffle on a dainty curtain and swaying slightly in the breeze.

He knew gorgodons had an excellent sense of smell. None of them stirred as he counted the ones he could see. Two on the side, sleeping out in the open. One smaller gorgodon, half in, half out of its shelter. He did not know how many others lay inside the shelters.

There was nothing to do but walk right into the middle of the nest. He saw the opening to the cave ahead, just a slit in the wall, not big enough for a gorgodon to get through. If he could make it through the opening, he would be safe from them.

Jude Watson

He started across the nest. A gorgodon stretched and flopped close, and he had to leap out of the way. Which unfortunately entangled him in the foul-smelling, sticky saliva hangings over its shelter. Silently, Ferus fought to extricate himself. It was like being trapped in the thick sap from a tree.

The gorgodon opened one lazy eye. The eye was yellow, and Ferus saw himself reflected in the enormous dark pupil.

He looked very small. And, he imagined, tasty.

The gorgodon opened its mouth and roared, its triple row of yellow teeth still tinged with pink from its last kill. Ferus's blood was already cold, and now it turned to ice. The other gorgodons stirred, and suddenly the air was filled with their cries.

There was a time to fight, and a time to run. He ran.

The tail came out of nowhere, smacking him in the back like a too-friendly hello. This particular greeting made pain ratchet through his body and sent him airborne, flying toward another gorgodon, jaws open to catch and no doubt break him in half.

If ever he needed the Force, it was now. Ferus reached out, but he met nothing, no current that could help him. He knew he was too focused on the jaws that awaited him. The present moment wasn't too awful—he was merely flying through the air. It was the next moment that was the problem. The one where the rows of teeth razored him into slivers.

Instead of reaching for the Force, he reached out for the stringy, elastic saliva looped over the shelter as he flew by. He grabbed at it with desperate fingertips, and it yielded to him.

All he needed was a break in his momentum, and he got it. He pulled on the thick gummy substance, and it boomeranged him backward. He slammed into the side of a boulder, but at least that was better than landing in a gorgodon's jaws.

The gorgodon let out a howl of anger at the diversion of his lunch. He bounded after Ferus. But Ferus was already moving, keeping an eye out for those lethal tails. The gorgodon's hide was so thick that blaster bolts couldn't kill them, only annoy them, so he kept his blaster holstered. He needed to get to the vulnerable

spot behind their necks to kill them, and he'd just as soon not get that close. Besides, he was the intruder. He had entered their nest, and he supposed that they had every right to be annoyed with him.

But did they have to be so *mean* about it?

He used the next gummy trail as a swing to lift him over a gorgodon's back. A paw as big as a gravsled tried to swat him, but suddenly the Force was with him, and he sailed above it. He felt the Force now, and he used it to extend his jump over the final gorgodon shelter.

He was almost to the cave opening when he felt himself lift into the air. His first thought was surprise. *I am in the air again, but I didn't jump*, he thought, dazed.

Then the pain hit. The left side of his body was on fire. He realized that he'd been hit with a gorgodon paw. Not only that, but the blow had been perfectly aimed. He was on a straight trajectory to the other paw, which was lifted in wait. He saw quite clearly that the creature meant to whack him from one paw to another, batter him senseless, pop him in his mouth, and crunch.

Not his idea of a pleasant afternoon. Or a decent demise.

Ferus somersaulted in midair, the pain forgotten as the urge to survive surged. He was conscious of the clarity of the cold air, the crystal beauty of the ice, the smell of the gorgodons, rich and fetid in his nostrils.

His boots thudded into the gorgodon's massive palm. His knees bent, and he vaulted off, using the creature's power to send him flying. But instead of allowing the gorgodon to dictate his direction, Ferus used the Force to catapult himself up to the gorgodon's head. He landed in the fur, so slick with ice it was like the slope of a hill. Ferus slid down the creature's neck, slipping his vibroblade out of his tunic and, with a quick swivel of his body, used all his body strength to bury it in the soft place behind the creature's skull.

The bellow of the wounded animal rang through the air and he shook Ferus off like a dry leaf. Again Ferus flipped into the

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air, but he landed safely on the ground. He took off for the cave as the creature rolled on the ground, trying to dislodge the vibroblade.

He slipped inside the cave opening and was plunged into darkness. He'd made it. The gorgodons were behind him, but he knew the worst still lay ahead.

Chapter Eleven

Trever wrapped himself in a thermal blanket and sat with his back against an ice-slicked boulder. His breath frosted in the air, so he puffed out a few clouds and watched the vapor dissipate. He did it again. Then he closed one eye and tried to figure out where the ice stopped and the frozen lake began.

Never a dull moment.

Ferus had left him behind again. Just when there was a promise of some action, he was parked like a training scooter. He hadn't expected this. When he'd stowed aboard the cruiser, he hadn't known what to expect, but it certainly wasn't this. He just wanted to escape his homeworld and the Empire—and instead, he was tangled up with Jedi. Okay, he'd been able to see a bit of the galaxy, but hanging around with a resistance hero and a Jedi sure didn't pay well. To Trever's mind, adventure should mean some sort of score along the way. What else was danger for?

Who knew Ferus would turn out to be so...noble?

He still liked Ferus, but he didn't sign on to be the moon to his planet.

Trever munched on a protein pellet. Maybe he should split off from these guys and find a nice planet somewhere, someplace out in the Outer Rim where the Empire's reach wasn't quite so...grasping. Some decent place that was crying out for a little

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black market action, where he could buy and sell in peace. Someplace a harmless thief like himself could make an honest living without an Imperial boot in his face.

Was that ice cracking, or a footstep? Trever stopped crunching on his pellet. It certainly couldn't have been the wind ruffling any nonexistent leaves on this frozen wasteland of a planet. No, it was definitely what he thought it was...a footstep.

Rolling himself more securely into the concealing thermal blanket, he slid behind a boulder. Directly below him a narrow path curved around the slope. In another second he saw two stormtroopers in some sort of snow gear walking toward him.

He saw at once that they weren't looking for anything. They were just two soldiers, walking a perimeter, doing a boring job.

But they were nowhere near their base. And that meant they'd left a vehicle somewhere near. Which could be a very interesting situation.

Quietly, Trever slipped out of the thermal blanket. He waited until the stormtroopers had disappeared from sight and then slid down the slope. He trudged through the snow, heading back the way the stormtroopers had come.

It didn't take him long to find their transport. Trever let out a low whistle. *Sweet*. It was a small space cruiser. No doubt it was outfitted nicely. He could use some decent food, maybe a few tools or an easily lifted auxiliary booster...just a few things they wouldn't notice were gone.

The ramp was still down. Talk about a gracious invitation. Trever walked up and slipped inside the ship.

First he raided the galley and wolfed some food down while he searched. He slipped a brand-new fusioncutter into his pocket—you never knew when one could come in handy—as well as a small pair of electrobinoculars. He took a couple of handfuls of drills for the fusioncutter, just in case he needed them.

He hesitated over a tracomp sensor, but decided they might miss it. He didn't want to leave any evidence of his presence. But

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he pocketed a handful of alpha-plus chargers he found in a toolbox. They were powerful explosives, usually used in mining. No doubt the troopers needed them to blast through any rocks that got in their way.

Trever thought there'd at least be a couple of spare credits lying around, or some sort of portable currency. There wasn't even a credit chip to pocket. But his pockets were bulging anyway, and it was time to go.

Suddenly he heard the crackle of a transmitter. The stormtroopers were returning. Trever looked out. They weren't in sight yet.

He was just about to race down the ramp when he noticed out of the corner of his eye that a transport was landing. They'd see him if he exited now. Cursing his bad luck, Trever faded back and hovered by the top of the ramp.

The stormtroopers approached the new craft just as it landed. The dome roof of the cockpit opened and Trever clearly heard the officer inside ask, "Anything unusual?"

"Nothing to report," one of the stormtroopers said.

"Return to base. Attack scenario seven implemented."

"Another drill?"

"Negative. A ship was spotted. Sweep indicated a life-form near the vicinity of the cave. You're sure you didn't spot anything unusual?"

"Yes, we're sure."

Just then, one of the drill bits stuffed into Trever's tunic pocket fell out. It bounced with a metallic *ping*, then rolled down the runway.

He just *knew* it didn't pay to be so greedy.

There was a split-second pause. Then the stormtroopers wheeled, searching the area. The sensors in their helmets flashed red as they got a fix on him.

They charged, their blasters pointed straight at Trever.

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Quickly he closed the ramp and jumped into the cockpit. He'd once won a hotwiring competition among the youngest thieves of Bellassa. Now he halved his record time.

It was time to go for a ride.

Chapter Twelve

Sancor was a small humanoid whose dark robe seemed to dwarf him. His fingers were long and triple-jointed, and they moved easily over the keyboard as information flooded the screen.

“This is Osh Scal, our medical supply officer,” Tuun said, indicating Obi-Wan, who had changed into the appropriate clothes for a medical supply officer, including a face-covering surgical mask.

“At last.” Sancor waved Obi-Wan forward without turning to look at him. “I’ve been waiting for fifteen minutes.”

“I was on my break,” Obi-Wan said, keeping his tone friendly. “How can I help you?”

Sancor snapped his long, flexible fingers and then held out his hand. “Your supply records covering the dates I indicated. Remain here while I go through them. I’ll have questions.”

“I’ll try to answer them.” Obi-Wan handed Sancor the disk that Tuun had given him.

Sancor slipped it into the readout slot. Information sprang to the screen, numbers and letters and codes.

Obi-Wan leaned forward as Sancor scrolled through the material.

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"If you tell me what you're looking for, I might be better able to assist you," Obi-Wan said.

"I haven't asked you a question," Sancor snapped. His small black eyes flitted over the material. "Dr. Naturian, I don't remember asking you to stay. I'm sure you have duties elsewhere. A patient to save, perhaps."

"Yes. I'll go, then." With a final look at Obi-Wan, Tuun backed out of the room.

"Here." Sancor's long finger rested a fraction of space away from the screen. "A vitals scan kit. You ordered several replacement kits here."

"Yes, it's an item we use frequently..."

"But these are used specifically for newborns to scan for potential problems."

"No, not exclusively."

"There were no newborns in this facility at that time."

"I don't know, I haven't cross-referenced with patient records—"

"But I have." Sancor kept scrolling through. Suddenly, he stopped. "What is..." he closed his mouth. Obi-Wan watched his face. He had discovered the items that Tuun had entered. Sancor licked his lips as he studied the screen. Obi-Wan could see that he was trying not to show his excitement. "You had only a few patients in the med center during this period. Only one was seriously injured. Yet these supplies show a major catastrophic illness was treated. Your records don't reflect that."

Obi-Wan shrugged. "Records can get sloppy."

Sancor gave him an icy look. "Odd that you disparage your own abilities. These records are meticulous. And the med droids are programmed to enter all of their procedures. They should match."

"I'm not a doctor," Obi-Wan said. "I'm just a technician. Maybe you'll want to check the med droids."

"If I wanted to talk to a med droid, I would summon it. Who else had access to your ordering at that time?"

“I do the ordering.”

“Does anyone check your orders or see them after you submit them?”

“No.”

Sancor looked at him, not believing him. The long fingers stroked the keys. “Let’s check the employee list.”

One by one, names and photos popped up. Suddenly Obi-Wan felt uneasy.

“I’m sure I can help you,” he said. “I just need to familiarize myself with some details.”

“Surely you can remember something that happened so close to the end of the Clone Wars.”

“It was a chaotic time.”

“On the contrary. Things were slow in this quadrant; you were an adjunct on an archeological dig. The action was elsewhere.” Sancor turned and looked at Obi-Wan, his antennae twitching.

Behind Sancor’s head, the name OSH SCAL popped up, together with a likeness not at all like Obi-Wan’s. All Sancor had to do was turn and he would see the truth, that Obi-Wan was impersonating the supply officer.

Obi-Wan reached out for the Force.

“You’ve seen enough for now, and I can go,” he said.

Sancor shook his head. “I have certainly not seen enough.”

Sancor’s mind was too strong to influence. But Obi-Wan had to prevent him from turning.

Obi-Wan stood up abruptly. “I can access the files more quickly on the other port.”

“Then do it.”

He almost got away with it. But Tuun suddenly poked his head in. “Are you almost done?”

Sancor swiveled to see Tuun, and his gaze swept the screen. He saw the name and the image.

When he turned back to Obi-Wan, he had a blaster in his hand.

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“Suppose you two tell me what’s going on,” he said. He smiled, and they saw small, pointed teeth. “I didn’t know if you had something to hide. But now I’m sure.”

Obi-Wan felt the surge of the dark side of the Force before it happened. He activated his lightsaber just as Sancor fired at Tuun. Obi-Wan was able to deflect the fire as Tuun leaped back. Some of the blaster bolts streaked through the air and thudded into the wall. Obi-Wan sprang forward, his blaster activated and ready. He saw the flare of surprise in Sancor’s face, and then he ran, brushing past Tuun and taking off down the hallway.

“He’s heading toward the main hangar,” Tuun said. “We can’t let him go. He has the disk!”

Obi-Wan took off. Sancor threw back the sleeves on his robe, and Obi-Wan saw the glint of a wrist rocket.

“Get down!” he yelled to Tuun, even as he dived for cover.

The rocket exploded, sending chunks of the ceiling raining down on his head. Obi-Wan rolled out of the way and charged.

Sancor followed the rocket blast with a barrage of blaster fire. Obi-Wan swung his lightsaber, deflecting the fire.

Sancor raced through a doorway, and Obi-Wan followed. He found himself in a dark, oval room. It took a moment for him to get his bearings, and then he realized that he was on an observation platform high above one of the new operating theaters below. The platform was thrust out from the main corridor and held seats for observers as well as vidscreens and computer consoles.

The empty seats were ghostly in the dim light. He could not see Sancor, but he felt his presence. He did not bother to strain his eyes. Instead he called on the Force and listened.

There, in one corner of the room. Sancor was hiding. Waiting.

He heard the hiss of the wrist rocket before it fired. He jumped aside as it whistled past. It blew a hole in the wall as big as a door. But Sancor had underestimated the power of the missile and the structure of the observation platform. The platform began to tip on its supports.

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Obi-Wan made a diving leap toward the hole blown in the wall. He somersaulted through it and landed on the corridor floor as the platform tore away from the wall.

Sancor screamed and scrabbled at a console, desperately trying to make his way to the corridor as the floor tilted under his feet.

The platform slowly broke away from the wall. Sancor lost his grip and fell through the air.

Obi-Wan made his way to the edge of the hallway that ended in midair. He looked over the lip of the floor. Sancor had landed far below on a tray of sharp medical instruments.

It was over. Sancor was no longer a threat.

Slowly, Obi-Wan rose to his feet. Sancor's death wouldn't help matters. Malorum would wonder why he hadn't returned.

Either Padmé's secret was safe, or Obi-Wan had put it in greater peril than ever.

Chapter Thirteen

The darkness of the cave began to gray at the edges. Ferus's eyes adjusted to the lack of light. The cave walls glowed slightly from the crystals embedded in their rocky surface. Pictographs on the walls told stories of Jedi exploits from thousands of years before. Jedi or no, he was part of that tradition.

The Crystal Cave. They had whispered about it as Padawans and had longed to see it. He remembered his journey here with Siri, when he'd come to build his own lightsaber. He had been tormented by the visions, had at one point curled into a ball to escape them. They had accused him of being on the run from his own true nature, of avoiding the Living Force because he was afraid of himself. They said he only pretended humility, that his prowess as the best apprentice pleased him too much.

They showed him a vision of himself in a torn Jedi tunic, his lightsaber broken, and he had known they were showing him that he would never be a Jedi. At the time he'd thought they were warning him that he wouldn't pass the trials. Now he knew that the vision had come true. He had not become a Jedi Knight.

Back then there was only one who could surpass him—Anakin Skywalker. The visions had told him that jealousy blinded him, and prevented him from being Anakin's friend. He had seen a dark figure in a cape that had frightened him.

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I'm waiting for you, Ferus. I lie in your future, the vision had said in an odd, disembodied voice. He had been terrified by that more than anything else.

Now he understood what he'd seen. Possible futures, glimpses into his own fears. He'd only found freedom when he left the Jedi. Freedom to be himself. Roan had taught him that. Roan had taught him not to care what anyone thought, but to regard everyone's feelings. It was a distinction he had somehow not been able to learn at the Temple. He had been too busy trying to be perfect.

He knew now that he hadn't been jealous of Anakin, but he had been afraid of him. Why? He still didn't know the answer to that question.

And what did it matter? Anakin was dead. Like all the others.

He was older now. No longer a Jedi. What visions could come to him now that would frighten him? He had been through a war. He had been scared down to his boots and kept on walking.

He knew himself. He knew his limits and he knew his capabilities. The cave couldn't scare him anymore.

"You think so?"

A shimmering image appeared before him. Ferus's breath caught. Siri. His Master, his friend.

"Here's the thing," Siri said. Even though her image shimmered and fractured, the voice in his head was pure Siri—direct, a little mocking. "You haven't changed a bit. Listen to you—you're still telling yourself that nothing can touch you, that you're the *best*. Is it so important to be the best, Ferus?"

He shook his head. That wasn't what he was thinking.

Was it?

"Is that why you left us? Because you weren't the best, and you knew it?"

"No," Ferus said. "That isn't why I left."

Siri crossed her arms and leaned back, but there was nothing to lean against. She stayed oddly propped against the air, her

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booted feet crossed. “You don’t have to be afraid of what *we* are. You have to be afraid of what *you* are.”

“I’m not afraid,” Ferus said aloud, even though he knew Siri was just a vision. It seemed pretty stupid to argue with a vision, but there was no other way through. “I know myself now. I didn’t then.”

Siri’s snort of laughter brought him the pain of her absence. But somehow this time her mockery wasn’t leavened by affection. It felt harsh to him. “Well, you should be afraid. You’re still fooling yourself!” Suddenly she leaned forward. “You want to save the Jedi, all by yourself? Make up for leaving us?”

“No, that’s not why!” Ferus said. “I only want to help, I want to fight the Empire!”

“You want to go back and change your decision,” Siri said. “You want to be a Jedi again. I’ve got a Holonet newsflash for you—you can’t! You’ll never be a Jedi again! All those minor attempts to use the Force—it’s pathetic! What did I always tell you? In your plans lie responsibilities. You’re forgetting that. Again!”

Siri began to laugh. Her features suddenly fragmented into pieces of light. Then her face reassembled in an odd way, as though her features didn’t go together. It was some faceless monster, some image of the dark side of the Force that had appeared to him. How had he forgotten that, the way the images shifted shape until he didn’t know who was a Jedi and who was the dark side of the Force?

Or was he projecting what he saw? Were his fears creating the vision?

Fears he hadn’t even known were there.

Suddenly, Ferus wished he had decided to do anything else—confront the Emperor himself—instead of entering this cave.

He had done it for Garen, for a Jedi he hadn’t even been close to. Someone he couldn’t remember very well, a flash of a smile, an ease with the Living Force, an amazing pilot, Obi-Wan’s friend.

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That was enough. The surge of feeling that came when he thought of Garen taught him something. He must still be a Jedi, there must be a part of him that still vibrated with the Force, if he felt that connection. Garen's life was his life. It was as simple as that. What he had forged in his childhood still rang in his bones.

He walked on, deeper into the cave. Now the walls grew irregular with the chunky crystals that were embedded in the rock. Ferus knew that it would not help him to study the crystals, to find the most beautiful. He must allow the crystals to call to him. If the Force was strong in him, the crystals he needed would speak to him among the thousands that lay around him. *Wait. The right ones will appear.*

He felt awed, being in this spot. Suddenly it came over him, the fact that he was here. Whether he liked it or not, he was on the Jedi path again.

"Unbelievable."

It was Anakin Skywalker. For a moment, Ferus thought it was really him. He seemed so solid, so real. Then he realized that Anakin was young, probably about sixteen, the age they were when Ferus had left the Jedi.

"It's so like you," Anakin said, "to think that you're the only one who can do something. That ego of yours. No wonder nobody ever liked you."

Ferus waited. He knew this was an image, that he couldn't fight it, couldn't argue with it. And he'd long ago come to terms with what Anakin thought of him. This wasn't anything he hadn't heard before.

"Your jealousy destroyed your future," Anakin said. "You tried to destroy mine, and that didn't work, so you quit."

"You knew Tru's lightsaber was faulty," Ferus said. He couldn't help it. The words had been bottled up for so many years. Ferus and Anakin had both put their friend Tru at risk—and even though Ferus hadn't meant to, he'd accepted the blame. "You were jealous of our friendship, so you said nothing. You

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hoped we'd get in trouble with the Council. And we did. You knew we wouldn't step forward and tell the truth about you. And we didn't. So you kept your silence, and your place in the Jedi, and you let me walk away from it all."

Anakin shrugged. "Is that your version?"

"It's the truth. And the funny thing is that it was the best thing that happened to me. I found myself."

"Right," Anakin said. "So I hear. Yet I found myself, too."

Suddenly the crystals dimmed. Ferus couldn't see the walls of the cave any longer. A wind moved through the cave.

Wind? Ferus thought. *Where is the wind coming from?* He felt the coldness of fear enter him.

You think you know what fear is?

The whispers began.

Evil was in the cave. He knew it by the icy hand that clutched his heart, by how the strength drained out of his legs.

Had he blundered? Had the dark side of the Force taken over the cave?

Out of the darkness a shadow grew. It was a thing, not a person. A shadow filled with cruel pain. Then the shadow formed and re-formed, and he saw it was a figure. A dark helmet and cape.

Breath entered the cave. A harsh, artificial sound. He heard the indrawn breath, the exhale. It was as though the creature breathed in the darkness and breathed it out.

Darth Vader.

Chapter Fourteen

He had heard of him, of course. The Emperor's enforcer. The one who came down with an iron fist. And now Ferus knew he was a Sith.

The voice was low and chilling.

"It is our destiny to meet. It is my chore to tell you about the truths from which you hide. You are not a Jedi. You will delude yourself that you are. But then, you have always deluded yourself. You might as well give up now. Because you will fail. And you will bring everyone down with you. Watch."

Ferus saw the vision clearly. Garen, another Jedi who he couldn't place, and, oddly, Raina. And Roan was there, too. They were looking up at a fireball in the sky. As he watched, the fireball consumed them.

He wanted to cry out, but he couldn't.

"In your plans lie responsibilities," Darth Vader said. "But you never think of that, do you? Just your own glory."

In the middle of his fear, Ferus felt a stubbornness rise, and he grabbed it. The Force was here, and he knew that, even if at the moment he was too afraid to access it. Just knowing it still existed in this cave gave him hope.

With the beginning of hope came courage.

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He had almost forgotten this. The Force was everywhere, even where evil breathed.

“These are things that can happen,” he said. “I can make my own path.”

“You have *never* seen the truth.”

“If this is your truth, give me my illusions.”

Ferus walked forward, straight toward Darth Vader. He was afraid, but he accepted his fear and kept going. If this was to be the end of him, then he would accept it.

The instant he touched the dark cloak, he felt as though he’d been burned. A cry was torn from his throat and he was flung through the air. He hit the ground and moaned.

The dark side of the Force retreated. He felt it sucked out in a vortex.

He was alone.

Through the mist of pain he saw a trio of pale blue crystals, glowing like stars. He struggled to his feet and walked toward them. He put his hand on them, and they were warm. They fell into his hands.

He tucked them into his tunic pocket. He would have to fashion a handgrip somehow. He wasn’t sure how he would do it without the resources at the Temple, the access to design archives, special tools, and power cells. The crystals were the most important, however. He could figure out a way to do the rest.

But the visions weren’t done with him yet. Another vision appeared, an ancient Jedi slumped against the cave wall, his tunic tattered, his eyes closed. It was as though he held the defeat of all the Jedi in his shrunken frame.

Ferus walked toward the vision. He would confront this, too. The sound of his footsteps echoed softly. The vision raised its head.

“Who are you?” it asked.

It was real. It was a man.

Ferus slowly lowered himself to a crouch. “Garen?”

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Through cracked lips, the man asked, "Who wants to know?"
"I'm Ferus Olin."

"I know...that name. Siri's apprentice."

"Yes. We met once...long ago. I'm a friend of Obi-Wan Kenobi's."

"Obi-Wan. He's alive?"

"Yes, very much so. He's too stubborn not to be."

Garen leaned back against the rock wall of the cave and smiled. "Yes, now I know it's really you, Ferus."

"He sent me here to find you. He's coming back with a ship."

"Oh, great," Garen said. "Obi-Wan is going to rescue me. I'll never hear the end of it."

"Everybody has a price to pay for survival." Ferus grinned.

"We didn't think any other Jedi had survived."

"We?"

"Fy-Tor-Ana. She came here, too...but she was going to make it back to Coruscant, see what had happened to the Temple, and come back for me. She never...made it back."

Suddenly, they heard a terrible noise, a howl of agony. And then the air was filled with horrible cries.

"Visions?" Ferus wondered.

Garen struggled to sit. "No."

"The gorgodons," Ferus said. "But why would they be—I'll be right back."

"I'm not going anywhere."

Ferus dashed back through the cave to the opening. He put his eye to the slit.

Stormtroopers with flechette launchers and flame projectors were systematically destroying the gorgodon nest. The creatures fought back ferociously, but Ferus could see that they were only minutes away from defeat. They fought to protect their shelters, but Ferus saw how the stormtroopers were aiming fragmentation grenades at the boulders and outlying walls to create a shower of debris outside the cave entrance. Even as he watched, a large boulder fell directly in front of him, wiping out his view and

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sending a cloud of pulverized stone into the cave. Coughing, he backed up.

They knew he was here. They were cutting off his exit. He would have to go out the front of the cave now.

He hurried back to Garen. “We have to leave through the front. They’ll be waiting there for us, I’m sure.” Ferus fumbled at his utility belt. He took out a flask of water and a protein pellet. “Can you swallow this?”

But Garen merely looked at it. He turned his gaze to Ferus, and Ferus saw resignation there.

“You must go. I came here to be with the Force, to rest with the visions of my ancestors. The Living Force is too weak in me now.” He struggled to extract his lightsaber from his belt. He handed it to Ferus. “It needs new crystals. I saw you find yours—the blue ones. Put them in. It’s yours now.”

“I can’t take this,” Ferus said.

“You must,” Garen said. “I will never use it again. It would make me proud to hand it to a fellow Jedi.”

“But I’m not even a Jedi. Not anymore.”

“I feel the Force in you,” Garen said. “That’s enough.”

Ferus handled the lightsaber reverently. Oddly, the handgrip felt perfectly balanced in his hand. Even though it was nicked and battered, and a large dent was in one side, it nestled in his palm as though he’d fashioned it himself. He touched the latch on the handle and placed the crystals inside. He activated it and the shaft hummed to life, glowing a pale ice-blue.

“Use it well,” Garen said.

“I will. I’m going to get us out of here.” Ferus leaned down and looked Garen in the eye. “The Living Force may be weak, but it’s still in you. It wouldn’t be right to leave you without trying. It would be against the Jedi code.” He held out the water and the pellet. It took a long moment, but Garen nodded.

Ferus helped Garen sip the water and swallow the pellet. Then he helped him to his feet. Together, they moved toward

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the front of the cave. Ferus didn't know how he could fight and protect Garen, but he knew it must be done.

He wondered where Trever was. He wondered where Obi-Wan was. He wondered how he had gotten himself into this predicament. He wondered why he couldn't just find a nice planet for a comfortable exile and try to ignore the Empire. He wondered if the visions were right, if he was taking on this task just to prove he was a Jedi after all.

As they approached the opening to the cave, Ferus moved Garen to the far side, near a large rock. "Stay here while I check this out."

He crept forward. Just as he feared, there was a full squad of stormtroopers lined up outside in battle formation. He counted fifteen. Not an impossible number for one Jedi, but one Jedi who hadn't used a lightsaber in a long time might have a problem.

He watched them for a moment, trying to figure out their plan.

And then he knew what it was.

Behind the troops, a Merr-Sonn Mobile Grenade Mortar was angling into position. It was capable of firing a total of one hundred grenades every second or so, with storage of more hundreds of grenades that could be reloaded through a tube. Operated by two stormtroopers on a repulsorlift sled, it could accelerate fast and rise up in the air to thirty meters. In short, it was highly maneuverable, a deadly killing machine.

Garen had somehow found the strength to creep up beside Ferus. He let out a low whistle. "This is not good news."

"They mean business," Ferus agreed.

"So, how good are you with that lightsaber?"

"Actually, I'm a little rusty."

"I wish I hadn't heard that."

"Do you have any other weapons?"

"No."

"Take my blaster pistol."

"What's your plan?" Garen asked.

Jude Watson

"I'm supposed to have a plan?"

"Well," Garen said, "I'd suggest one. Let's refer to our Temple training."

"A quiz? Now?" Maybe he hadn't missed the Jedi so much after all.

"When you meet overwhelming force and you're outnumbered, what are the strategies available to you?"

"Retreat, for one," Ferus said, his eyes on the stormtroopers. "That's always a favorite."

"Impossible in this situation, I'm afraid. Let's try number two."

"Turn the enemy's advantage into yours." Ferus found the words coming easily to him. He remembered sitting in classes at the Temple, studying scenarios. It was thought that even though the Jedi were peacemakers, they should have a knowledge of military strategy. It had served him well as an officer in the Clone Wars. "Capture the grenade mortar," he said slowly. "But how?"

"I came to this cave many years ago to find my crystals," Garen said. "I decided to wait outside until I was ready, until I felt the Force grow around me. Well, that's what I told myself. Actually, I was stalling. I sat for a long time, just studying the cave opening. And I noticed something—a bird. It was one of those tiny white snowfeather birds, and it had built a nest over the cave opening. And I saw that I'd been looking at the cave wrong—it looks as though it's carved out of the face of the mountain, but actually, there's a little overhang above it."

"I'm not getting this," Ferus said. "And I don't like to remind you, but there's a troop of stormtroopers and about a hundred grenades sitting out there."

"The overhang is big enough for a snowfeather nest, but it's also big enough for a man to perch," Garen said.

"Perch?! I don't want to perch! I'd be one big target."

"You can get up there by concealing yourself behind the boulders just inside the entrance," Garen went on. "Climb up the

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side of the cave, then swing yourself out and into the ledge outside. If you do it quickly, you might not be spotted.”

“*Might* not?”

“They won’t be looking above the cave, they’ll be looking into it, trying to spot movement. Then you can Force-leap over the first columns and land close to the mobile mortar. When they spot you, I’ll try to divert their attention.”

Ferus looked at Garen dubiously. He looked as fragile as the snowfeather he spoke of. This was the craziest plan he’d ever heard.

But he didn’t have a better one.

And time was running out.

“They’re going to advance,” Garen said, watching. “Let them. You go after that grenade mortar. I’ll stay here to meet them.”

Ferus looked at him incredulously. “Alone?”

“I won’t be alone,” Garen said. “The visions will help me. Now go! And may the Force be with you.”

Was this the right plan, or was he just used to listening to Jedi Masters? Ferus kept to the side of the cave as he approached the entrance, pressing himself into the shadows until he merged with the cave wall. He climbed up on the boulders, moving stealthily. He balanced on the top boulder, hooking his fingers around the top of the cave, searched for a secure handhold. He would have to do this blindly; he couldn’t see out of the cave. He’d have to trust that once he swung himself up and out that he’d be able to slide onto the overhang.

He scanned the stormtroopers, now below him. They were facing forward, blaster rifles held at the ready. No doubt they were waiting for orders on their headsets. Behind the lines the mobile grenade launcher hovered. He saw the stormtrooper on the front platform with his hands on the controls.

Now or never.

He swung out into midair, flipped his body over, missed ramming the cave wall by a hair, and landed on the narrow ledge. He rolled as far back as he could, concealing himself in the

Jude Watson

shadows. His heart hammered as he waited, wondering whether a grenade would blast him into the sky.

Nothing happened. They hadn't seen him. So far, so good.

Ferus felt the Force gather. Garen. Garen had accessed it and it was growing.

Ferus leaped over the heads of the attacking stormtroopers. But if those stormtroopers didn't see him, the ones on the mobile mortar did, clattering it to life. Grenades flew through the air, heading toward him in midair. Garen's lightsaber felt balanced in his hand, and the blue shaft glowed. He deflected the grenades as they whizzed toward him, batting them down to the stormtroopers below.

It felt extraordinary to have a lightsaber back in his hand. His training came back to him, and he didn't have to push for it. It was there in the way he moved, there in the precise angle of his attack.

He landed on the mobile platform, his boots connecting with the stormtrooper and sending him flying off the platform. He slid into the seat, reversed the repulsorlift engine with a jerk, gunning the motor to capacity. The stormtrooper behind fell off.

The battalion scattered before him as he hit them with a barrage of grenades. He could use the mortar to enter the cave and swoop up Garen.

But suddenly the mortar pitched to the side. The stormtrooper had suddenly leaped back aboard. Ferus felt the heat of a blaster bolt by his ear. He ducked, trying to wield his lightsaber at the same time. It was a difficult move, but one he could have easily managed in his youth. Now his lightsaber skills were rusty and he was just a bit off balance. To Ferus's horror, he began to fall off the mortar as the stormtrooper aimed his blaster and fired.

So. Maybe I'm not as up to speed as I thought I was.

He felt the searing heat in his shoulder. He was blown back off the mortar and hit the ground hard.

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Okay. A gorgodon uses me as a punching bag and an evil vision throws me around like a laserball. Now I've been shot with a blaster. Not a good day.

He saw the mortar stop in midair and spin. It was coming back for him.

Fury pounded through him. Fury at himself. He'd blown it. It was going to end here for him, outside the caves of Ilum. The most sacred place to the Jedi, and here his bones would lie. The Force slowed down time, and he reactivated his lightsaber. He couldn't move out of the way of the coming barrage in time, he knew that, but he would join the Force still fighting.

He saw a shimmer out of the corner of his eye, a flicker of light. Something was falling from the sky. Suddenly, an explosion of light sent him crashing back to the ground.

An alpha charge. A small blast thrown right on the mobile mortar. Then another, and another.

The grenades went up in a huge blast. Ferus rolled down the slope, tumbling, anything to get away from that terrible heat. He came to rest by knocking his head against a boulder.

He saw Trevor in a fighter, releasing explosives onto the squad below, with a bulkier transport ship in pursuit. The stormtroopers went scurrying for cover.

Ferus didn't stop to experience the pain he was feeling. He accepted it and set his mind to the next thing. Under the cover of Trevor's attack, he took off for the cave. His eyes streamed tears from the smoke, and his shoulder felt as though it was on fire.

He found Garen near the mouth of the cave, slumped on the floor, a blaster held in his fist.

The ship touched down right outside the cave entrance. Ferus picked up Garen. He felt as light as a bird. He ran toward the ramp. The stormtroopers peppered him with blaster bolts, but Trevor managed to release a few more explosives behind the boulders, and the blasterfire abated.

Ferus ran up the ramp with Garen. He collapsed on his knees on the floor.

Jude Watson

As the transport that had been chasing him made its way down, Trever jammed the controls up. Pushing the engines, they streaked off. They couldn't boost off-planet, but they could outrun the transport.

"I know a place we can hide," Garen said. "Obi-Wan can find us there."

Chapter Fifteen

The distress call reached Obi-Wan as he was leaving Polis Massa. He knew exactly which cave they would be hiding in, waiting for him—a crystal-less cave on Ilum that the Jedi often used as a safe hangar.

For the rest of the ride, Obi-Wan could only think two things: *Garen is alive* and *Malorum must be stopped*. When he reached the cave, Ferus and Trever carried Garen on board. Obi-Wan wanted to go back and see his old friend immediately, but he knew a quick escape was essential. It was only after they reached deep space and a recovered Ferus took over the controls that Obi-Wan went back to the cabin to see his friend.

If before he had merely been grateful to know that his friend was alive, now his heart broke to see him.

He would not have recognized him. With his eyes closed, Garen lay back, his skin as pale and fragile as snow. Obi-Wan felt as though if he breathed on him he could dissolve into vapor. Garen had always been robust and vibrant. His body had crackled with electricity, his eyes brimming with life and humor.

Obi-Wan approached with quiet steps. Garen didn't stir. Obi-Wan could see the delicate blue veins in his eyelids, the dark circles of shadow under his eyes. His cheeks were hollow, his hair sparse. His once muscular chest looked as though it had caved in.

Jude Watson

Garen's eyes opened as though it was the hardest thing he ever had to do. He focused on Obi-Wan.

"Can I get you anything?" Obi-Wan asked.

Garen's voice was a whisper. "Just don't bring me a mirror. I can see on your face how bad it is."

"You're alive," Obi-Wan said. "For that I'm thankful."

"I'm not so sure about that, myself. But thanks for finding me."

Each word seemed to cost Garen an effort. What could Obi-Wan do now? How could he care for him? He couldn't bring him back with him to Mos Eisley. It would attract too much attention, and besides, there was hardly good care on Tatooine. He needed rest and constant monitoring.

Garen was already slipping back into unconsciousness.

"We can talk later," Obi-Wan said. He rested a hand on his friend's shoulder, feeling mostly bone. All his feeling welled up in him, the love for his friend, the helplessness he felt, the memory of what Garen had been. The loss of what they'd had.

He collected himself and went back to the cockpit. He slipped into the chair next to Ferus. Trever had given in to exhaustion and had fallen asleep curled up in the galley seating area.

"Thank you for rescuing Garen," Obi-Wan said.

"This is only the beginning," Ferus said. "D'harhan said there was another Jedi prisoner on Coruscant. Garen said he met another Jedi at the cave and she went on to Coruscant. It could be the same Jedi. She could still be alive and a prisoner."

"Coruscant is a big place. She could be anywhere."

"They can't hide a Jedi. We can find her. We can find them all."

"And then what?"

"We take them to a secret base."

Obi-Wan shook his head. "You would only be bringing more danger to them, Ferus. Our best hope for survival is to stay scattered for now. Too much concentrated Force energy in one place might alert the Sith."

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"I hardly think a handful of Jedi would trigger a response," Ferus said. "Besides, we'll be well hidden."

"How are you going to find this place?"

"I've already found it. So have you."

Obi-Wan thought for a moment. "The asteroid."

"It's not mapped, it travels constantly."

"It's a hunk of rock with no shelter in the middle of an atmospheric storm."

"See what I mean? Perfect." Ferus's voice was strong, determined. "I've already contacted Roan, my friend from home. I know it was dangerous to risk a transmission, but he's the only person I can trust who isn't already on this ship or on that asteroid. We have a coded system we set up years ago, a series of places to meet. He's bringing supplies and then returning to Ussa. I gave him a detailed list of med supplies that we'll need for Garen and some other things. We'll have to be self-sustaining."

Obi-Wan could hear the excitement in Ferus's voice, but he could not join in. It was not a time to argue. It was a time to rest and plan.

"Wake me when we get to the spaceport," he said.

Trever peered out through the cockpit window at the Nixor spaceport. It was a small port that orbited around the Nixor system. It was a crowded, disorganized mess. The Nixors, feuding with the rest of the system, refused to update the port or even do regular repairs. Pilots went out of their way to avoid it if they could, but it was always crowded due to its central location in the Mid-Rim. It was an easy place to hide.

"You sure pick some nasty holes in the galaxy to meet in," Trever observed.

"That's the whole point. Sometimes the best place to hide is in a crowd." Ferus activated the ramp and hurried down. He searched the scruffy crowd and saw him almost immediately. Roan was thinner, and looked as though he still hadn't fully

Jude Watson

recovered from his injuries during a stay in an Imperial prison. But his smile was the same.

They walked toward each other slowly.

"You look like a durko on a bad day," Roan said.

Ferus knew it was true. He'd administered bacta on the ship, but the combination of the blaster wound and the battering from the gorgodon had drained him. And given him quite a lovely greenish bruise on his temple, near the silver streak in his hair.

"Thanks. You're not exactly a prize," he answered.

Roan moved forward and grasped Ferus's upper arms. It was their own special greeting to each other after a long absence. When Roan touched Ferus, he saw him grimace.

"What is it?"

"Just a blaster wound. Nothing to worry about."

"Can't you just escape and hide, like everybody else? Do you have to go looking for trouble?" Roan teased, but his eyes were worried.

"Well, you know those Imperials, they're such a bundle of fun. I just can't stay away."

Roan's smile was forced. "I guess you have to do this."

"I do. I wish..."

"...it were different, I know."

"There are Jedi alive out there," Ferus said. "I want to find them, make them safe."

Roan nodded slowly. "I thought you left the Jedi Order."

"I did."

"Really? Doesn't look that way from here."

"Now they need me. Some are still alive. Hiding. If they had a place to come to, a place to be safe, that would give them a chance to fight again. So I'm going to establish a secret base."

"Ah, that explains the greenhouse," Roan said.

"Were you able to bring it?"

"I have a pre-fab greenhouse, food supplies, seeds, plants, water purifying system, and a complete med unit. Everything you asked for. Plus extra fuel and some datapads, a few other things.

STAR WARS: Dark Warning

Your vioflute, so you can torture others in the evenings the way you used to torture me.”

Ferus laughed, but sadness overtook him. His old life was truly gone. Gone forever.

“You’re putting yourself in great danger,” Roan said. “But I guess you know that. Well, don’t worry, partner. We can see each other from time to time. I have work to do on Ussa, too. The Empire has cracked down on the resistance, but we’re biding our time. You’re doing the right thing.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” Ferus said. “I only know I have to do it.”

“Sometimes,” Roan said, “that’s all you get to know.”

Chapter Sixteen

The homing beacon worked perfectly, but they still had to dive into the atmospheric storm to make it back to the asteroid. Ferus was more used to the space shears now as well as the sudden gravity vortexes that could send the ship spinning out of control. Still, when the asteroid came into view, they all breathed a sigh of relief.

Toma and Raina must have seen them approach, because they stood waiting while Ferus landed the craft. Ferus lowered the ramp and the three of them walked down.

“We’re very glad to see you,” Toma said.

“We were getting tired of each other’s conversation,” Raina said. She was trying to joke, but there was strain on her face. No doubt she’d been afraid they weren’t going to return.

“We have supplies,” Ferus said. “And a wounded comrade.”

“Let me see to him,” Raina said. “Before the Clone Wars, I was completing my med training.” She lightly ran up the ramp into the ship.

Ferus turned back to Toma. “We are going to establish a base here. We hope to find more Jedi to come. I have enough supplies to keep us self-sustaining. What I need is for beings to run it while I’m away. I was hoping to talk you and Raina into it. I realize it’s not exactly an appealing job, but...”

STAR WARS: Dark Warning

"I can't speak for Raina," Toma said, "but I can imagine no better cause."

They unloaded the supplies. Obi-Wan and Ferus and Toma set up the prefabricated housing that was packed neatly into durasteel containers. The plastoid structures were durable and built to withstand heat and cold.

When they were done, they paused to watch the dark sky overhead. Since the asteroid traveled continuously and had no sun, it did not have a division between night and day. Still, there was the feeling that a day had passed, and it was time for sleep.

Obi-Wan looked in on Garen. Raina had set up a kind of clinic in one of the structures. Garen was sleeping.

"It will take some time for him to recover," Raina said quietly. "There is nothing we can't do for him here that he couldn't get in a first-class facility. He needs rest and food and basic med care. I'll make him better, Obi-Wan." She looked at Garen with sorrow in her face. "I remember him from the Clone Wars. He's greatly changed."

He put his hand on her shoulder. "Thank you for caring for him."

Obi-Wan ducked out of the structure. Ferus was standing alone, looking up at the sky.

"How's Garen?"

"Sleeping. Raina doesn't know how long his recovery will take. But he'll be all right here."

"Now that he's settled, I think we should leave for Coruscant," Ferus said. "We've no time to lose."

Here it was. Here was the moment he would disappoint him. "I'm not coming with you, Ferus."

Ferus looked saddened, but not surprised. "I guess I knew that. I just hoped you'd change your mind."

"I have given you as much help as I can give."

"What about Garen? He's your friend!"

"I'm leaving him in a place he can be cared for."

Jude Watson

“Yes, he needs care. That’s my point. We found Garen, and we know there is another Jedi who needs our help.” Ferus shook his head. “I don’t understand how you can walk away from that.”

“And I can’t explain.” *There are some things you just can’t know.*

Ferus snorted. “Your secret mission again.”

“I’m sorry I can’t tell you. If you need my help from time to time, I’ll help you. But I can’t build this base for you. I can’t travel the galaxy with you. I have my place in this struggle already mapped out.”

He could see the impatience on Ferus’s face. “So you’ll abandon the ones who need you, like your best friend?”

“They have you. This is your mission, Ferus. You chose it.”

Ferus looked away, furious.

Obi-Wan’s own feelings were a tangle inside him. He couldn’t say that he didn’t think Ferus had a point. Part of him wondered if he was abandoning Garen, and he worried about this fragile group. Toma and Raina were courageous and resourceful, but they could only do so much. Trever was sharp and inventive, but he was still a boy. Garen was ill and frail. And Ferus was just putting his feet back on the path. He took on too much, thinking he was still as powerful a Jedi as he used to be.

And he was leaving all of them to fend for themselves.

He was doing the right thing. He knew that. But to go on, to do that thing, to not have regrets...that was something he wasn’t capable of.

Acceptance doesn’t guard you from regret.

It was a memory this time, and it rang clear as a bell in Obi-Wan’s mind. He and Qui-Gon having one of their many talks after a mission. He couldn’t remember now what it was that he regretted, or what he had been asking. But he remembered a blazing sunset and the beginnings of the night sky above it, and he clearly remembered Qui-Gon’s answer.

To be a living being is to live with regret. Those who say they regret nothing are liars or fools. Accept your regret the way you accept your mistakes. Then move on.

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Obi-Wan looked at Ferus, and he felt pain in his heart. Ferus was so brave, and there was so much ahead of him. Yet he must leave him. The fact that his heart could break, the fact that he could be filled with this confusion...that was something he hadn't felt in a long while. It was something he'd hoped never to feel again. Yet here he was, his heart full of feeling.

And then he knew, as surely as he knew his mission, why Qui-Gon had told him he wasn't ready for training with the Whills.

When you know why you are not ready, you will be ready, Qui-Gon had told him.

Now he knew. Now he was ready to return.

"I have two things to ask of you," Obi-Wan said. "One is Garen."

"I will see that he's cared for," Ferus said stiffly. "You don't have to ask. I'll never abandon him."

"Thank you. Now I must ask you something else. I'm afraid that Malorum is looking into Polis Massa. It's best if you don't know why. I managed to deflect the inquiry for a time, but I don't know what Malorum knows or what he's planning to do next. The answers to those questions can endanger every Jedi—and the fledgling resistance."

"I'll track him for you," Ferus said. "It may take some time."

"Do your best," Obi-Wan said. "If he continues to investigate, I'll need to know. On your way to Coruscant, I need you to drop me on Tatooine. It's time for me to get back."

"You're treating me like an apprentice," Ferus said. "You won't tell me what you're doing, and you're giving me orders."

"It seems that way," Obi-Wan said. "But I don't think of you as an apprentice."

"What do you think of me as, then?" Ferus asked irritably.

"A Jedi," Obi-Wan said. "One of the last."

Ferus's troubled gaze cleared. He took a deep breath that seemed to calm him.

"It's been so long since I was a Jedi," he said. "The old ways are ingrained in me, but I have to struggle to rediscover them."

Jude Watson

Acceptance, right? Acceptance without judgment. That's what I need."

"It's something to strive for, anyway."

Ferus turned to face him. Obi-Wan saw that Ferus didn't understand him. Hadn't forgiven him. But he had taken a step on the path. "Then I will try."

Chapter Seventeen

They landed Toma's ship outside the settlement of Mos Eisley. Obi-Wan wrapped his cloak around him. The wind was up, and the sand outside was blowing crazily. Good. Everyone tended to stay in their shelters during sandstorms. He would have a solitary walk to his dwelling.

"Good-bye, Trever," Obi-Wan said. "We've had an interesting journey together. May the Force be with you."

"Back at you, 'Wan."

Trever went back into the ship, and Obi-Wan stood at the top of the ramp with Ferus. Particles of sand stung their cheeks and exposed skin.

"Charming place," Ferus remarked. "I can see why you want to stay."

"And your asteroid is a garden?"

"Ah, but it will be."

Obi-Wan paused. There was a part of him that wanted to stay with Ferus, to hold on to this one human link to the past. But he knew what he had to do, and that he had to do it alone.

"I'm glad our paths crossed again," he said now.

"You were kind to me as an apprentice," Ferus replied. "I admired you more than any Jedi...you and Siri. Now I guess I have to trust you, too. That's not as easy."

Jude Watson

“Qui-Gon would say that when it comes to the Living Force, trust is the only currency,” Obi-Wan said.

Ferus nodded. “You said you would help me if I needed it. I pledge the same to you. May the Force be with you, Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

“May the Force be with you,” Obi-Wan said. “Find them and gather them. Make them safe.”

With his hand on his new lightsaber, Ferus strode back up the ramp. Obi-Wan stepped back onto the rocky soil of Tatooine. He retreated to the relative shelter of a cliff overhang to watch as Ferus did a flight check before departure.

A voice entered his head.

I never said trust was the currency of the Living Force. This time, Qui-Gon sounded dry, amused.

Obi-Wan smiled. “You didn’t?”

I don’t think I’d say anything that pompous. It sounds more like you.

Obi-Wan leaned against the rock wall. “It’s good to be back.”

Something has changed with you. I sense it.

“I know now why I wasn’t ready to receive the training,” Obi-Wan said. “I had lost my connection to the Living Force. You taught me, my life had taught me, Siri taught me...how to connect to the Living Force. I learned to live with an open heart. But then Anakin turned to the dark side, and I lost my perspective.”

You felt only rage and blame and you turned it on yourself.

“There was much to blame myself for.”

Maybe.

“But still, I couldn’t see my way out of it.”

You bore all the responsibility for what happened. You went over and over your mistakes. You must know this, Obi-Wan—it is Anakin who chose to turn to the dark side. Grief did not push him there. You did not push him there. He made the choice.

“There were so many things I should have seen. So many places I should have corrected him.”

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Yes. But you must accept your regret the way you accept your mistakes. Then move on.

“Someone told me that once, long ago.”

The smile had come back into Qui-Gon’s voice. *Pity you didn’t listen.*

Obi-Wan felt something lift. Qui-Gon was right. Blame was crippling him, and now it was gone.

He had learned to forgive himself. He had learned to open himself up to pain again.

He was no longer the same man he was when he first exiled himself on Tatooine. He had wanted to exile more than himself. He had wanted to exile his heart.

Well, he would live here, and he would watch over Luke, but he wouldn’t stop living.

And he would start with forgiveness for his mistakes. He knew now that he was part of one great struggle. The galaxy did not turn on his failures. It did not rest on his success.

The power of the Empire was awesome. Fearsome. But Luke and Leia were alive. Ferus was alive, and maybe other Jedi were, too. Someday, a rebellion would rise.

Obi-Wan watched the gray ship lift into the air and disappear from sight. Ferus was the future. Ferus would take up the fight that Obi-Wan could not join.

Obi-Wan readied his mind. He felt Qui-Gon’s presence, steady and sure.

“I am ready to begin,” he said.

Chapter Eighteen

Ferus eased the ship into the crowded express space lane toward the surface of Coruscant. Trever had never seen so much space traffic. The lanes were dense with vehicles, all jockeying for position.

“Never seen anything like it, right?” Ferus asked.

“Never.”

“It has just about anything you’d want,” Ferus said, waving a hand at the thousands of buildings. Trever felt awed. He’d never seen so many lights, and behind every light was a business, a home, a dwelling. “And I have contacts here. It might be a place for you to put down roots.”

An ache twisted Trever’s stomach. He’d thought he and Ferus were partners. Sure, he’d thought about leaving him on Ilum, but he hadn’t. Now Ferus was taking the first occasion to dump him.

Ferus saw the look on his face. “What is it?”

Trever’s face hardened. “Ready to unload the space garbage, huh?”

“No,” Ferus said. “But I have a new goal now. It’s dangerous. I don’t know where I’ll be going, how I’ll be living. I can’t drag you into that.”

“You’re not dragging me.”

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“And you can’t tell me that you haven’t thought of leaving,” Ferus said. “There are easier ways to live.”

“Okay, I’ve thought about it,” Trever admitted. “And I can’t say I’m crazy about this Jedi-base business. But I don’t know, I feel kind of stuck with you. That’s the awful, new-moon truth.”

Ferus laughed. “Thanks. I guess.”

Trever stretched out and propped his feet on the console. “So if you don’t mind, I’m not going anywhere just yet.”

Ferus knew he should keep a low profile. He knew he should dock at the most crowded spaceport and lose himself in the vast crowds.

But he couldn’t resist passing the Jedi Temple. He had to see.

It rose before him. At first, it seemed a mirage, unreal, a holo-projection. Because this couldn’t be real.

The towers—broken. The top half of the Temple spires—scorched by fire.

It was ruined. The gracious rooms, the hallways, the gardens, the fountains.

Gone.

A deep tremor went through him. His hands shook on the controls. Beside him, even Trever was silent.

Had he really absorbed the loss of the Jedi until this moment? It didn’t seem so. Now it filled him up. He choked on his rage, on his pain. On his sorrow.

They would be in danger on Coruscant every moment. He didn’t know where to start looking for the imprisoned Jedi. He didn’t know which of his old contacts were dead. Some could now be spies for the Empire. He was in a new galaxy now, and he wasn’t sure he had the tools to maneuver through it.

But with his eyes on the devastation of the Temple, he was more certain than ever of his path.

Jude Watson

Why him? The visions had accused him of arrogance. But Ferus knew the answer was simple. He was the only one who could. He would find the last of the Jedi and bring them home.

STAR WARS.

LAST OF THE JEDI

UNDERWORLD

BY JUDE WATSON



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Chapter One

Glimpsed through a curtain of cold gray rain, the ruined Jedi Temple looked more like a trick of the eye than a once-magnificent structure. To Ferus Olin, the Temple appeared to be a ghost image, like an afterburn on a vidscreen. He blinked. He felt as though the entire structure was dissolving before his eyes.

Since the end of the Clone Wars, so much in his life had seemed not real and hyper-real at the same time. He knew it wasn't logical, but it made sense to him. One moment he had been leading a peaceful life on a pleasant world, and the next he was a resistance fighter, then a prisoner, then a fugitive. And with each new twist and turn, he found himself wondering: *How did this happen?*

Get a grip, Ferus, he told himself now. He was here, and he had a job to do. The Temple was all too real, occupied by Imperial stormtroopers.

He'd absorbed the shock of the Empire occupying the Temple. Except that seeing it was like being punched in the gut. The Temple looked somehow terrible to him, like a being that had received a mortal wound.

He had once been a Jedi apprentice. He had left the Jedi, but step-by-step he was managing to reclaim what he'd lost—the same pure connection to the Force, the same allegiance to his

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fellow Jedi—or, now, the memory of them. Seeing the Temple like this hurt the deepest part of him.

“Ferus? Don’t know whether you’ve noticed? But it’s raining.”

Ferus turned to his companion, Trever Flume. The thirteen-year-old’s teeth were chattering. The hood he’d pulled over his bluish hair hadn’t done much to keep him dry. A drop of rain rolled off the tip of his hood and hit his nose.

“Rain” was putting it mildly. Now Ferus felt his sodden cloak, his clammy skin. Part of his Jedi training had been to learn how to be impervious to physical discomfort. Feel the rain, feel the cold, then let it go. But he hadn’t been a Jedi in a long time, and he had to admit he was freezing.

“Not that I’m complaining,” Trever said through clenched teeth. “But I can’t feel my fingers. Or my feet. And I’m hungry. There are icicles on my hair. And I’m—”

“Right. I get the point,” Ferus said. “Just a few more minutes.”

“Fine. If my toes fall off, just alert me, okay? Stick ’em in my pocket or something.”

Ferus shook his head. He couldn’t seem to lose Trever. The boy had stowed away on Ferus’s escape ship from Bellassa, and it had taken Ferus a few weeks to realize that Trever wasn’t going away. He was a smart, resourceful kid, but Ferus still wasn’t crazy about taking him along. Ferus had given him the option to leave, but Trever hadn’t taken it. Ferus didn’t quite know what to do with him, and until he figured it out, he and Trever were stuck together. Trever had street skills and a kind of stubbornness that could morph into courage. There were times when Ferus was actually glad to have him along.

Ferus peered through the electrobinoculars again. The Temple was definitely being used. It had taken him only a few hours in Coruscant to pick up the gossip on the street. The Empire was using the Temple as a prison for captured Jedi. There were whispers that some had survived, that some had returned to the Temple before the homing beacon was dismantled. There they

had found stormtroopers and an Imperial prison where their home had been.

That was the rumor, anyway.

Ferus didn't know how much of it was true. Obi-Wan Kenobi had told him that he'd managed to transform the homing beacon into a warning beacon before any Jedi had returned. That didn't match the Empire's story. So part of the rumor was a lie. Even if some Jedi had returned, there couldn't be many of them. Ferus knew that almost all had been killed in the purge.

But even if there was only one, he had to get in and see.

He already suspected who was inside: Fy-Tor-Ana, the Jedi known for her grace with a lightsaber. Ferus had rescued the great Jedi Master Garen Muln in the caves of Illum, and Garen had told him how Fy-Tor had left him and promised to return. She'd been heading for the Temple and had never come back.

She had to be here. If she'd been free, she would have returned to Garen. Ferus could only conclude that she was either imprisoned or dead.

Garen himself was recovering on a hidden asteroid that Ferus hoped to set up as a new Jedi base. He didn't know how many Jedi might be alive, but they would need a safe place to live.

He noted the comings and goings of Imperial ships. Since the old hangar had been destroyed, they'd built a new landing platform off the once-grand front plaza. It protruded like an ugly scar.

Don't think of what was. Think of the next step.

So, it was a prison. He knew prisons.

It was difficult to break out. But not as difficult to break *in*.

"I know what you're thinking," Trever said as he stamped his boots to warm his feet. "You're thinking we can do it."

"Well, we can."

"Yeah. Sure. No problem. What's a couple hundred stormtroopers?"

Ferus kept his gaze on the Temple. "I have an advantage."

"Besides me?" Trever smirked.

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"They might occupy the Temple, but they don't *know* the Temple. No one knows it like a Jedi. I can get us in—and get us out."

"So you say."

Ferus gave him a level look. "Listen, I can do this alone. I'd rather do it alone. We can have a rendezvous point—"

"No." Trever's voice was flat. "I'm with you."

They'd already had the argument. Trever saw the shift in Ferus's gaze that meant he'd accepted the inevitable. "So how do you figure we'll get in?" the boy asked.

"I think I have a way," Ferus said. "We drop from a ship straight onto the burned tower. I can see a place where part of the tower was blasted away. That will give us some footing. Directly above there used to be a small, glassed-in garden on the south side. It was used to grow herbs for the kitchen. If we can climb over that blasted part into where the garden used to be, we can get into a service hallway. There was a system of linkage service tunnels that ran to the service turbolifts. With any luck some of the tunnels have survived, and we can get into the lower levels that way. That's the only place the prison could be."

"What ship are you talking about?" Trever asked. "We left Toma's star cruiser at that landing platform. Besides, if we're both going in, who's going to drive?"

"We're not going to use Toma's cruiser." Toma was a new ally. He'd just fought a battle against Imperial forces on his home planet of Acherin. He and his first officer, Raina, had joined forces with Ferus and Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan had returned to his mysterious exile, but Raina and Toma had remained on the asteroid to watch Garen. "I've got a different idea. We'll hire an air taxi."

"You mean, jump in an air taxi and say, 'Hey, driver, could you please drop us on the tower?'"

"Well, it has to be the right driver."

"Okay, let's review," Trever said. "We're going to drop from a moving vehicle onto a ruined tower to find a maybe-opening that

could lead to some blasted-to-bits tunnels, in order to maybe-make it into a place flooded with stormtroopers so we can maybe-rescue one Jedi who, if we're lucky, might still be alive."

Ferus looked Trever right in the eye. "You have a problem with that?"

"Nah," Trever said. "Let's go."

Many things had changed in Coruscant, but some things remained the same. On one of the lower levels of Galactic City there was still a shadowy landing platform where private air taxi drivers could be hired to do illegal and dangerous trips, no questions asked. While Ferus negotiated with a squat, muscular humanoid with tattooed facial markings, Trever found a food stand that looked like it might not poison him. He quickly devoured a veg turnover and downed a carton of juice. When Ferus beckoned, he stuffed another turnover in his pocket and was ready to go.

They climbed into the back of a battered air taxi and zoomed through the colorful laserlights of the entertainment district. The driver kept to the prescribed space lanes—for now. As he snaked his way up through the levels to the Senate district, they could see the ruined Temple better and better.

Here the space lanes were crowded with traffic. The driver slid smoothly into the flow. He kept the engines powered down, but at the last moment he veered off into a lane closer to the Temple. He dived down and around the damaged tower and hung in the air.

"Go if you're going," he grunted. "In a moment I'll be on Imperial sensors."

Ferus activated a liquid cable line and turned to Trever. He saw the boy pale.

"It will hold you," Ferus reassured him. "And I'll be right next to you."

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Trever swallowed, then nodded. Ferus hooked the second line to his belt.

Ferus released both liquid cables himself, aiming for a spot above a jagged edge of the tower that looked like it would hold them. The line caught and jerked them forward roughly as the driver accelerated. Ferus cursed the driver in his head for the premature boost as they flew wildly through the air, the wind whistling against their ears. Rain pelted their faces like sharp needles. Ferus landed hard on the protruding edge and grabbed for Trever to guide his landing. Trever smacked against the tower and hugged it.

“That was fun,” he croaked.

“Just don’t look down.”

“I’ll try not to.”

The air taxi zoomed off, merging seamlessly back into the flow of heavy traffic. The whole operation had taken seconds.

Ferus wiped the rain out of his eyes. From his position on the tower, a good deal of Galactic City was spread out below him. He could see the sprawl of the Senate complex and the new, massive statue of Emperor Palpatine that Palpatine himself had commissioned. From here, Ferus and Trever were invisible to the Imperial traffic heading to the new landing platform, but he couldn’t rely on it for long.

Ferus felt the rough stone of the Temple against his back. Sure, he would have to break in, but a surge of feeling rose in him, a connection like no other.

He was home.

Chapter Two

A flexible durasteel arm of a sensor was still sticking out of the wall. Ferus tested his weight on it, and it held. Using it as leverage, he was able to hook his fingers over the edge above and boost himself up for a quick look at the site of the old garden.

With a grunt, Ferus balanced on his palms. The garden hadn't just succumbed to the fire, he saw—it had been blasted. Chunks of blackened stone blocked the former entrance. The glass had shattered and needles of it were still lying about.

He remembered....

Standing next to Siri as she crushed an herb and held it under his nose. "What does it say to you?"

"It's an herb," he said.

"But what does it say?"

"I don't understand, Master." What did she want? Ferus was only thirteen, just beginning his apprenticeship. He was afraid all the time of doing or saying the wrong thing.

"This is part of the Force, too, Ferus. Connection to living things. Close your eyes. Smell. Good. Now. What does it say?"

"It says...lunch."

Siri barked her short laugh. "Not very imaginative, but I guess it will have to do. Let's try another...."

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“Master? Yoland Fee doesn’t like anyone to pick his herbs. It’s a rule for the Padawans.”

Siri turned to him, her hands full of edible flowers and green herbs. She smiled.

“You know, Ferus, if you could manage to get some of that starch out of your tunic, we’d get along much better.”

Ferus felt the strain shoot through his arms from holding himself up. He dropped back to his perch. He hadn’t fully realized that entering the Temple put him at risk from more than Imperial troops. He’d take stormtroopers over memories any day.

Siri had been right, of course. Thinking back to that moment, he remembered how careful he’d been to keep his spine straight, his gaze level. He had been conscious of his every word, tailoring it to what the perfect apprentice should say or do.

Every time Ferus looked back to a memory of himself as a Padawan, he wondered how anyone could stand him. It was only later, on Bellassa, through his friendship with Roan Lands, that he had learned to unbend from the rigid contours he had set for himself, to see that perfection was a prison he had built that kept him apart from others.

He missed his old life with Roan as much as he missed the Jedi. War and the Empire had torn his life in two, as it had for so many in the galaxy. At first he hadn’t recognized the change. Palpatine’s grab for power had been so slow, so careful. So fiendishly smart. He had known that in times of turmoil beings looked for leadership—and didn’t examine too closely what that leadership was up to. When the reality behind the mask emerged, it was too late.

“The stones have collapsed around the opening,” he told Trever. “We’ll have to blast one. Think you can manage it?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

He had discovered that Trever was something of an explosives expert. Trever could calmly take apart an alpha charge and amp it or weaken its power without batting an eye. His

brother Tike had been part of the resistance movement on Bellassa and had taught him. Tike had died, along with Trever's father, at the hands of the Empire. After that, Trever had made his living on the streets of Bellassa, and had picked up plenty of knowledge on the way. He was a product of war and suffering, old before his time, hiding the vulnerabilities of a boy that still crouched underneath his bravado.

"We'll need a half charge, just enough to blow a small hole," Ferus told Trever. "We don't want to attract any attention."

Trever fished an alpha charge out of his utility belt. "This should do it. Boost me up."

Ferus gave him a boost. He held onto the boy's feet as Trever wriggled, positioning the charge between the massive stones.

"Let's take cover," Ferus said, easing Trever back down.

"It's only a half charge."

The blast almost blew Ferus off the ledge. He grabbed at the protruding sensor and swung in midair, caught by a buffeting wind. It grabbed at his body and twirled it like a reed. He decided to take his own advice to Trever and not look down.

He swung his legs back onto his old perch. Trever had squeezed himself into the carved-out opening.

"That was a half charge?" Ferus asked, incredulous.

"It's not an exact science, you know," Trever replied sheepishly.

"Let's just hope the stormtroopers didn't hear it. Come on."

Ferus boosted himself up once more to inspect Trever's handiwork. Despite the power of the blast, the hole was small, a testament to the strength of the stone. It was just big enough to squeeze through.

Well, that takes care of one of my fears, anyway, Ferus thought. They wouldn't be stranded on this tower. At least they could get inside.

He wouldn't think about how they would get out.

Yet.

Ferus Force-leaped up to the opening and balanced. He reached a hand down for Trever and hauled him up. They bent

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over and eased through the opening Trever had blasted through the stone.

They were inside the Temple now, in a place Ferus knew well, but he found himself lost for a moment. This bore no resemblance to the Temple he'd known. He was in a heavily damaged area, and for a moment he couldn't get his bearings. One wall was demolished, another blackened with smoke. The corridor he'd expected to turn into was gone. Instead there was a mountain of rubble.

"We'll have to go this way," he said, turning in the opposite direction.

They climbed over a collapsed wall. Ferus stood still for a moment. Despite all that had happened, the Force remained present. It was still here for him, and he connected to it.

Suddenly, he felt completely oriented, and very clear.

The Temple could be a gigantic maze to outsiders, but to a Jedi the design made sense. It had been fashioned to conform to the life of a Jedi, to make getting around easy. So it followed the rhythms of a Jedi, with meditation flowing into physical activity into nature into food into study into research and support.

"This used to be the droid repair area," Ferus told Trever. "So there should be an access to the service tunnels here, too."

Pools of water had collected on the floor. Rain dripped in. The smell of smoke rose from the blackened walls. Ferus tried to push any emotion away. He needed to focus.

"I like to look at the droids," Anakin said.

Ferus nodded. He had come to drop off a small droid for repair as a favor to a Jedi Master. To his surprise, he'd found Anakin Skywalker checking over droid parts.

He didn't know Anakin very well. He'd only just arrived at the Temple this past year. He'd heard the rumors, of course. How strong Anakin was in the Force, how Qui-Gon Jinn had picked him off a remote desert planet. How Obi-Wan Kenobi had offered to train him personally after Qui-Gon's death. How he could be the Chosen One.

"I built a droid on my homeworld," Anakin said. Something in his voice told Ferus that Anakin was lonely.

Ferus wished he had the ability to say the right thing, to respond with warmth to a boy he didn't know. He wished his awkwardness didn't come off as stiffness. He wished he were more like Tru Veld or Darra Thel-Tanis, who could talk to anyone and become their friend. But it was hard for him to know what to say. He didn't have that gift. His teachers were always telling him to be more in touch with the Living Force.

"I don't remember my homeworld," he said finally. "Or my family."

Anakin looked at him under a shock of blond hair. "Then you're lucky."

That lonely boy had grown into an astoundingly gifted Jedi. And now he was dead. Ferus didn't know how or where. He'd been reluctant to ask Obi-Wan. The look on the Jedi Master's face when Anakin was mentioned was enough to stop Ferus. Grief had marked Obi-Wan, and he looked older and grayer than his age would warrant.

Ferus was beginning to make sense of the blackened and twisted shapes now. There, the heap of fused durasteel—that had been the shelving that had run along one wall. It had held droid parts. Stone had crumbled into pebbles that crunched under Ferus's boots as he walked into the echoing space. He kicked through some melted parts on the floor. Gaping holes in the roof overhead had let in the morning rain. Rustlings told him that creatures were living here, scurrying through the debris.

The protocol droids were eerie shapes, half melted, their eye sockets blank. They looked like fallen soldiers.

The smell of decay was in his nostrils. Decay and failure and ruin.

And it was only the beginning of what he would see.

"So where's the entrance to the tunnels?" Trever asked.

Ferus wrenched his mind back to the task at hand. He gazed about, trying to orient himself. "That opening there leads to the grand hall. I think we'd better avoid it. The entrance to the

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service tunnels was over there. At least, I think that's where it was."

They stared across the room at a gigantic pile of rubble.

"All I can say is, if we have to get through that, you'd better be right," Trever said.

Suddenly they heard the noise of tramping feet.

"Stormtroopers," Trever whispered.

Ferus quickly pointed to a towering, misshapen pile of twisted metal. It had fused from the heat; it had once been a pile of droids. The jagged nature of the heap had created holes throughout. They would be able to squeeze inside and hide underneath it.

Just in time. A squad of white-armored stormtroopers entered the space through the blasted-out opening that led to the grand hall. The officer in charge spoke through his headset. "Sensors indicate life-form activity."

Trever looked at Ferus, alarmed. Ferus watched as the squad began to systematically comb the space, quadrant by quadrant. That was the trouble with stormtroopers, he thought testily. They were so *efficient*.

Within minutes they would spot them. Ferus had no doubt of that. They were circling the droid heaps, checking every crevice, every dark corner.

Ferus felt something wet and bristling brush his leg. Only the most severe discipline of the Jedi, ingrained in his bones, prevented him from flinching. A meek rat, fat and bold, waddled by. Before Ferus could warn him, Trever jumped slightly, banging his head against the metal. The faintest clang sounded through the space.

"Halt activity." The officer swiveled, training a glow-rod just centimeters from their hiding place. "Evidence of intruders. Search and destroy."

Chapter Three

Trever reached into his pocket. Without making a sound, he withdrew the turnover he'd placed there. He tossed it a short distance away. The meer rat scudded after it.

The officer caught the movement. The light from the glow rod was jerked toward the sound, and it caught the rat in mid-scurry.

"Another rat," the stormtrooper said in disgust. "They're so big they trip the sensors. I'm getting tired of these false alarms. Come on, let's head out."

Ferus and Trever waited until the sound of the footsteps faded.

"That was close," Ferus said.

"And there goes the rest of my lunch," Trever added.

They wriggled out. Avoiding the rat munching on the turnover, they headed toward the area where Ferus was sure they'd find the entrance to the tunnels. The debris was piled so high that there was no way to tell where the entrance had been. He closed his eyes.

Ferus concentrated on the memory of his brief conversation with Anakin as a boy. He used an exercise that every Padawan had learned. They were led to a spot, told to open their eyes, look for five seconds, then close them again. Then they were to

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describe everything they'd seen. Sometimes they faced what seemed to be a blank wall, and they would have to note every crevice, every irregularity.

Ferus reached back, past years of events and feelings that could cloud his mind, past his child's perspective, and focused on what he had seen. He could conjure up the texture of the cold against his fingers, the droid parts neatly labeled on the shelves, the banks of computers. When he remembered the ding on the dome of a battered astromech droid to Anakin's right, he knew he was getting there. The Force helped him to connect to memory as much as what was around him now.

He calculated the distance. He remembered how high the entrance had been, how many meters above his head. He remembered his own height and made the necessary calculations.

Then he walked forward. "It's behind here," he said, pointing to a spot in the pile. His Jedi memory and the Force had guided him.

Either that, or he was completely wrong. It wouldn't be the first time.

He unsheathed the lightsaber that had been given to him by Garen Muln in the caves of Illum. From the first moment, it had felt as if it had always belonged in his hand. He inserted the lightsaber and slowly rotated it until its heat started to dissolve the area around it in an ever growing circle. Trever stepped forward, fascinated as always by a lightsaber's power.

When Ferus had cleared enough space, he pushed aside the rest of the rocks and debris with his hands and crawled in, holding a glow rod in front of him. He could sense, rather than see, that he'd unblocked the entrance. He called back to Trever to follow him. He had to crawl for about twenty meters, but at last he passed through and was able to stand. Trever joined him seconds later.

It was difficult to get their footing due to the debris and dirt that littered the walkway. This had once been a gleaming white tunnel, lit by pale blue glowlamps. It had been built to transport

droids from repair to various points in the Temple. The ceiling was low and the walls curved around.

"This comes out near the living quarters," Ferus said. "That part of the Temple, from what I can see, wasn't as badly destroyed as the others."

"That means we'll be bumping into more stormtroopers," Trever said.

"I'll do my best to avoid them." Ferus slowly moved through the tunnel. "The Padawans used to explore all the service tunnels and little-used passageways. Sometimes it was helpful if you didn't want to bump into any of your teachers—if you'd forgotten an assignment or had skipped a practice session."

"Aw, Ferus, you've lived up to my expectations. I knew you were the kind of renegade who didn't do his homework."

Ferus snorted. Trever was way off base. Trever knew a different person from what Ferus had been. "Renegade" hardly fit the description of his Padawan years. Actually, he had never skipped an assignment or a practice session. He had striven for perfection in every waking moment. He was driven by his need to excel. As a result, he hadn't made friends easily. It was only near the end of his apprenticeship that he had grown close to Darra and Tru.

Darra had died on Korriban. He still felt responsible for her death. He had left the Jedi Order because of it.

And there was Anakin. Anakin, whose gifts were so great, who had thought of Ferus as a rival. He remembered their squabbles now, and their deep rift. He would have done things differently now. He would not have judged Anakin the way he did. Now Anakin was dead, along with Tru, along with the Padawans he'd lived with for most of his childhood. Even the greatest warriors of the Jedi—Mace Windu, Kit Fisto, even Yoda—could not defeat the Sith.

So what made him think that *he* could?

I know I can't defeat them. But maybe if we strike enough blows, we can hurt them.

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It wasn't in the Jedi nature to act out of anger. But was it really so wrong to enter a fight because you were so deeply and thoroughly enraged?

Ferus held up a hand as they approached the end of the tunnel. He knew that it opened into a service passageway that ran parallel to one of the main halls. He was betting that the stormtroopers would use the main halls, which were larger and led to the grand staircases and turbolifts. The service passageways were narrow and had a complicated layout. It was easy to get lost.

"Where do you think the prison is?" Trever asked in a low tone.

"It has to be in the big storage rooms," Ferus replied. "It's one of the only places that could be reconfigured into a secure area. And from what I could see through the electrobinoculars, it remains largely intact. There was a series of turbolifts at the end of the first service passageway that led down to the storage floor. With any luck they'll still be there. Even if they aren't functioning, we might be able to get down one of the shafts."

Waiting a moment to ensure that the service passageway was empty, Ferus edged out into the hall. Trever followed as he held the glow rod in front of him, keeping it down to its lowest setting. Here the walls were also blackened from the fire, but the hallway didn't seem too badly damaged.

Only a wall separated them from a main passageway, and they could hear the noise of activity on the other side.

"I don't get it," Ferus murmured. "There seems to be a lot of movement. This place must be more than a prison. No wonder there was so much activity at the landing platform."

"The more the merrier," Trever said grimly.

Ferus reached the turbolift area. He frowned in disappointment. What had been a turbolift bank was now a collapsed heap of duracrete. Even worse, it blocked the connection to the other service hallways.

"We're going to have to use the main hallway," he said. "Just for a bit, to get to the other turbolift bank."

He paused in front of a door. He heard no sound, so he cautiously eased it open. The hallway was empty. Ferus knew exactly where he was. If he followed this hall to the right, it would lead him to the Room of a Thousand Fountains. Beyond that was another passage that would get him closer.

Beckoning to Trever, he emerged into the hallway. Moving quickly and silently, they hurried down the hall. As they passed the large wooden doorway to the Room of a Thousand Fountains, Ferus's footsteps faltered.

"What is it?" Trever whispered.

"One moment."

He couldn't help himself. It had been his favorite place in the Temple. He had to see. Ferus pushed open the doors.

He took a cautious step inside. The first thing that struck him was the silence. In his mind he'd been expecting the calming note of splashing, trickling water. He had even turned his face upward to feel the cooling spray.

Empty. Desolate. The remains of the fragrant plants and flowers, dried, brown. Stumps rising like crooked fingers. Dried pond beds, stone urns upturned and cracked.

He turned. He would have to harden his heart against this. He couldn't allow every sight to be a blow. It would just slow him down.

They walked past the Map Room, where once a student could access any quadrant of the galaxy, any world. Ferus wasn't tempted to peek. And Jocasta Nu's beloved library—without even entering, he could see through the blasted doors that it had been systematically destroyed. All that knowledge, all that wisdom—gone.

Gone.

But I must keep moving.

They heard footsteps behind them. Ferus yanked Trever behind a tall column.

He pressed himself against the column as the footsteps drew closer.

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It was some kind of Imperial messenger and an officer.

“You were supposed to be here this morning.”

“It took some time to gather the data.”

“Well, you’re here now. Take it to the Inquisitor’s office.”

“Location?”

“Follow this hallway and go through the double doors. It’s the first door on your right, the one with the windows. Then put it down and leave. Inquisitor Malorum isn’t here.”

Malorum? At the Temple?

This could be either a disaster or a piece of good luck. Obi-Wan had asked Ferus to discover what Malorum was up to, if he could. And it sounded like Malorum’s office was right here, in the Temple.

Of course, Malorum knew his face. Not only that, he hated him. Lucky for Ferus that he wasn’t here.

Ferus thought back to the directions the officer had given.

It can’t be. Malorum’s office is Yoda’s living quarters?

“He’s not expected back until tomorrow. He’ll expect everything to be in order then. He’s going to move the base of operations over here from the Imperial Stronghold....”

The words faded as the footsteps did.

“Not that guy again,” Trever moaned softly. He had known Malorum, too, on Bellassa. It was Malorum who had put a death mark on Trever’s head.

“Yeah, he keeps turning up, doesn’t he?” Why would he put his office in the Temple? And why choose, out of all the hundreds of rooms, Yoda’s private quarters?

Because he can.

The arrogance!

They started down the hallway again. It was empty, and they hurried to the bank of turbolifts and jumped inside. Ferus’s heartbeat quickened. At last he would discover if any Jedi remained alive.

Chapter Four

The turbolift worked smoothly. It was a piece of luck. It descended all the way down to the storage floor and opened. Ferus was prepared, his lightsaber at the ready, for whatever would lie on the other side of the door. But it opened onto an empty hallway.

He took a cautious step forward. Not only empty, but...*dusty*.

He listened for sound, for movement. He brought the Force to him and sent it out. True, his Force sense was still rusty at times, but he received nothing. Surely if this were a prison, he would pick up echoes of the Living Force, no matter how faint. Especially from Jedi.

"You look worried," Trever whispered. "And when you worry, I worry."

"I don't *feel* anything," Ferus said.

"Is that all?"

"For a Jedi, that's everything."

They moved forward cautiously. Ferus wasn't as familiar with this area as he was with others. They were on the very lowest levels of the Temple now. All Padawans were required to take an extensive tour of the Temple, from top to bottom, and become familiar with the layout, but Ferus had only visited the storage areas infrequently.

Jude Watson

Luckily it was a standard layout, just parallel hallways leading to storage rooms of varying sizes. They walked down, peering into one after the other.

Empty.

Empty except for scattered bins, random items stored here and not raided because they weren't valuable—towels, tarps. Soap. Glow rods and servodrivars. Blankets.

"I guess the Empire found the treasure," Trever said. "But maybe they overlooked something? Anything down here?"

"What treasure?" Ferus asked.

"The treasure the Jedi had," Trever said. "You know the Order was rich. All those payments from worlds they protected..."

Ferus was furious. "That was a lie told by the Emperor. The Jedi never took payment for their services. Palpatine was trying to turn the galaxy against the Jedi to justify his crimes. And now you're repeating the lies!"

"Hey, Ferus, power down. How was I supposed to know it was a lie? Everyone said it."

"Everyone says the Emperor is on your side, too."

"Excellent point."

In many ways, this was the worst fallout from Order 66, the one that had destroyed the Jedi. History had been rewritten. Palpatine's lies had changed how the galaxy thought of the Jedi. Their lives of service had become bids for power. Their selflessness had become greed.

"I'm sorry," Trever said, looking at the expression on his face. "I hear the word 'treasure' and I start to salivate heavily. You know me...." He tried to smile, but his eyes were worried. "You forget I'm a thief."

"Not anymore," Ferus said. The moment of anger passed. He looked around. "I don't understand. This is the logical place for the prison. And the word on the street is that the Jedi are down deep in the Temple storerooms."

"Is there anywhere else they could be keeping them?"

Ferus shook his head. “Anything is possible, but...” He stopped. Just as they passed the largest storeroom, he thought he’d caught a glint of a reflection. Cautiously, he walked forward. There was no Living Force here. But there was...something.

He raised his glow rod.

It took him a moment to make sense of the piles, the jumble of objects. Rows and rows and rows disappearing in the dusky light at the corners of the vast space.

Lightsabers.

Ferus felt his breath catch and his heart stop.

He could not move.

Trever, sensing his emotion, drew back. In a rare display of tact, he said nothing.

Ferus moved forward. His boot hit a lightsaber hilt, and he flinched. He leaned over to pick it up. He ran his fingers along the hilt. He didn’t recognize it. He put it carefully back down.

Row after row after row...jumbles and piles, some laid out neatly, no doubt for identification.

“How many?” he whispered.

He leaned over to pick up a hilt here, another there.

Here was the proof. The Empire must have collected the lightsabers when they could, but for what purpose, he wasn’t sure. To identify Jedi, perhaps. But who would be able to recognize the hilts but another Jedi? Or perhaps they meant to study the lightsabers in order to be able to use them as weapons one day.

After all, Obi-Wan had told him that Emperor Palpatine was a Sith. Darth Vader was his apprentice. Did they want to build a Sith army?

But what did it matter? There was a pounding inside him, metal against rock. Something fierce and elemental. Grief was pounding him.

This is how it worked, he realized. Each time you think you have comprehension of your sorrow, you get blindsided again. You slide back into your rage and your disbelief.

Jude Watson

“All of them,” he said, walking on. “So many.”
And each one represented a noble life, gone.

And then he saw what he dreaded—the lightsaber of someone he loved.

He picked it up. He knew it well. He had even tried to fix it. Little had he known then that a favor for a friend would end up being the beginning of the end of his career as a Jedi.

Tru Veld had been his friend. Tru had been everyone’s friend. His silver eyes, his gentleness, the way he would start a conversation in the middle and circle around to the beginning. The way he had been the one to see past Ferus’s stiff manner into his heart.

He didn’t know what to do with the lightsaber. He couldn’t bear to leave it. But, gazing around, Ferus realized that Tru would want it to lie with the others. He placed it gently back down.

Some stormtrooper, some officer, some featureless clone, some brutal weapon, from the air or the ground, had cut down the brimming life and generous heart of Tru Veld. To the Empire he had been just another score, another Jedi down. Another step toward their goal. To Ferus, he had been full of complexities and ideas and hopes and passions and will. He’d been unique and fully alive. The fact that he was gone—here it was again, that feeling of something being too real, and yet impossible at the same time.

“Ferus,” Trever said urgently. “I hear something.”

And he should have heard it, too, if the roar of sorrow hadn’t been in his ears.

A squad of stormtroopers, by the sound of it.

He whirled around, his gaze searching for what he should have known was there.

“A silent alarm,” he said.

He knew the way they worked, the Imperials. He’d fought them for months on Bellassa. He should have known this.

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“They spread the rumors,” he said. *“They want everyone to think this is a Jedi prison. They know that any Jedi left alive will come.”* He turned back to Trever. *“Now I understand. This isn’t a prison. It’s a trap.”*

Chapter Five

There had to be another way out. There always was, even in storage areas like this one. Ferus knew that the Temple had been designed with an eye toward utility as well as beauty. Energy must be conserved, even physical energy. This space was too vast to have only one way to unload cargo.

“Follow me,” he whispered to Trever. Instead of leaving by the front door, they ran down the aisle, past the lightsabers, past the memories and the sorrow, to the very back of the room. There he found what he was looking for—an entrance to the service tunnels. This should lead them back to the hallway.

First problem: The tunnel was sealed with a door, and the old control panel didn’t work.

Silently and swiftly, Ferus sliced through the door with his lightsaber. It would leave evidence of their presence, but it was too late to do anything else. He could hear the squad now at the very front of the room. Any moment now they would be discovered.

Trever didn’t need an invitation. He bolted through the hole Ferus had created. Ferus followed and they ran down the service tunnel. As he ran, Ferus calculated where the tunnel was taking them. It made a sharp right turn, and he knew that they were now running parallel to the second service hallway.

"If we can get out somewhere along here, we can make it to the turbolift," he told Trever.

"And go where?"

"Well, anywhere but here is an option."

Ferus saw a control panel up ahead and, faintly, the outline of a door. He tried the control panel and this time it worked. The door slid open. Good. This way, once the stormtroopers entered the service tunnel, they wouldn't be able to pinpoint where Ferus and Trever had left it. It slid shut behind them.

They were in another storage room, which Ferus had expected. This one was filled with empty shelves. As they ran toward the door, Ferus suddenly stopped.

"Ferus, come on!"

He bent down and ran his finger along the shelf. "Look. They left marks."

"What left marks?"

"The bins. This was a food storage area." He sniffed. "You can still smell the dried herbs." *There's one for you, Siri. You knew it would come in handy.*

"Fascinating. Now can we continue escaping?"

Ferus was thinking fast, remembering. "Dry food storage had a separate delivery system. If the cooks ran out of anything, they could plug in what they needed on tech screens in the kitchen and the information would be transferred down here. Droids would monitor the readouts, find the items, and carry them to vertical lifts. The lifts run on compressed air. They would shoot the cans up to the food halls, where they'd be held in a temporary zero-gravity immersion—in other words, in midair. The lifts are small, but we might be able to squeeze in—that is, if the compressed air system still works." While he spoke, Ferus was quickly checking the control panel.

"You mean you're going to blast me up on thin air?" Trever didn't seem sure of *that*.

"You'll have the ride of your life."

"Can I remind you that I'm not a can of beans?"

Jude Watson

"We're in luck. It still works."

"Hey, what happens if the zero-gravity part doesn't work?"

"Look for a handhold on your way down. Trever, it's the only way to escape the stormtroopers. They'll never figure it out."

"This just keeps getting better and better," Trever groaned. But he squeezed himself into the small vertical lift, tucking his knees under his chin. "By the way, have you given any thought to how we're going to get out of the Temple?"

"I'm thinking."

"That doesn't sound very promising."

"I don't make promises. Only plans."

"It's a pleasure doing business with you, Ferus."

"One last thing—if I can't make it, try to make it to the landing platform and steal a ship. Meet me back at the asteroid."

He shut the door on Trever's incredulous look. The *whoosh* of air told him that the transport had succeeded.

Ferus crossed to the next lift tube. He flattened himself and twisted, but he could not fit himself into the opening. He slammed his head and bumped his elbow as he tried to jam himself in.

Wait, Ferus.

He focused on remembering.

Siri bent down to help him. He had fallen during a routine hike, just because he hadn't been paying attention. Fallen from a boulder, straight down, and hit the dirt.

First her expert hands made sure he was all right. Then she leaned back on her heels, balancing expertly despite the fact that they'd been hiking for six hours in rugged terrain.

"When you felt yourself falling, why didn't you use the Force?"

Because he was only fourteen, and it didn't come as easily to him. But Ferus didn't want to tell his Master that. "There wasn't time."

"There's always enough time for a Jedi," Siri said. "The point is, the Force is always around you."

Ferus struggled to sit up. He was growing fast, and his legs and arms always seemed to get tangled up underneath him. That's why he had fallen.

"Our bodies aren't just bone and muscle," Siri said. "They're also liquid. And air. And the ground isn't as hard as it looks."

Ferus seemed to feel every bruise. "So you say."

She sprang to her feet, reached out a hand, and hauled him up, laughing. "You make everything harder than it has to be, Ferus. Even dirt."

Ferus felt his body relax. The Force moved through him, and his muscles suddenly felt fluid. He bent and twisted easily and fit into the small space. Then he closed the compartment door and flew upward on a rush of air, so fast that he felt dizzy.

The compartment door opened as he felt himself held up on the zero-gravity field. He pushed himself out and landed on his feet on the floor of the vast Temple kitchen, capable of feeding hundreds of Jedi. Trevor was waiting.

"You were right," he said. "That was some ride."

Ferus glanced around. The kitchen had always been a busy place. The Jedi who had an interest rotated their service, and they were all willing to sneak a growing youngling a treat at any time of day or night. Now it was more or less intact, but, like most of the places he'd seen, strewn with debris and blackened by smoke. An attempt had been made in one corner to restore its function. He could see that the stove was working and a table had been cleared and set up for dining....

The Force surged, a warning, only a half second before he heard the door open.

He really had to work on his Force connection. What was the use of a warning if suddenly twenty stormtroopers appeared in your face?

"Whoa!" Trevor dived to the floor as blaster fire streaked through the air. Ferus's lightsaber danced, deflecting the bolts.

He spoke urgently under the cover of the noise. "There's another exit by the stoves. Go, now!" He barked out the order, and Trevor took off, running in a crazy pattern that made it hard for the stormtroopers to get a fix on him. Ferus retreated, keeping his lightsaber moving, and thinking, as a Jedi would, three steps ahead.

Jude Watson

They would follow him into the corridor. He wouldn't be able to lose them, not there. But the library was close by, half-demolished. There would be more cover there. If he could get to the second level of the library, he could get out the back door, and from there...from there...

Where?

The answer came to him. Yoda's private quarters. Now Malorum's office.

Malorum was away. It would be empty and quiet. And from there they could access files, maybe find a way to get out that they hadn't considered. And he could find out what Malorum was up to. The stormtroopers would never think someone would be stupid enough to hide in the main Inquisitor's private office.

The only problem was, he would have to go through too much of the main hallway to get there. They'd be spotted.

Ferus's mind cleared, and he recalled walking into the Room of a Thousand Fountains. The water system had been destroyed, the upper canopy that had duplicated the sky was tattered and half-falling. Once, that canopy had changed color throughout the day, shading from the pinks of dawn to the deep purple of dusk, as a lighting system mimicked the passage of the sun. Now the damaged canopy revealed the network of catwalks overhead that serviced the laserlights...

...and connected to the power conduit tunnel that ran in the walls. Smaller than the service tunnels, but built so that a service person could squeeze in to work on the circuits at any point.

Trever waited for him in the corridor. Ferus was a few seconds ahead of the stormtrooper squad. He dashed down the hall. He had no doubt that the officer in charge was calling for backup. Soon the hallways would be flooded with troops.

The stormtroopers burst into the hallway just as they scooted around the corner. Blaster bolts ripped into the walls, sending chunks of stone falling on them like rain.

"This way."

More blaster bolts shuddered down the hallway. They were shooting just to shoot now, even though Ferus and Trever were out of range. It was an Imperial tactic he remembered from his time in the Bellassan resistance—shoot to intimidate as well as kill. Why not? The Imperials didn't lack ammunition, and they didn't care about the physical destruction of property.

The door to the main hallway was jammed. Ferus leaped at it, using both feet and the Force. The door burst open, and he and Trever charged through. With a lift of his hand, he closed it behind them with the Force. Instantly it was torn apart by weapons fire.

Ferus darted out and across the hallway, down a short flight of stairs, and turned off with Trever at his heels. He pushed open the heavy doors to the library.

He told himself not to pause for even a moment to grieve again over the lost treasures here, not to notice as he kicked through the rubble left by the broken statues that had been the likenesses of the great Jedi Masters.

The staircase was gone. He climbed up a stack of rubble instead, Trever scrabbling behind him. They reached the balcony and ran down to the rear door.

He slid it open just a centimeter to look out. This time he had a few seconds to monitor the activity outside. A small knot of officers were walking away down the hall while several stormtroopers marched toward them. He'd have to time this carefully so that the stormtroopers would pass and the officers keep going before he and Trever ran out.

Downstairs he heard the squad searching the library. Any moment now they would appear.

The stormtroopers passed. Ferus and Trever had to take the chance.

Ferus slipped out of the library, Trever as close as a shadow. The troops didn't turn as they continued down the hall.

Ferus raced the short distance to the doors to the Room of a Thousand Fountains and burst through. Trever ran next to him

Jude Watson

now, keeping up without effort. At the end of the path, Ferus stopped and released his liquid cable line, grabbing Trever at the same time. The line pulled them to the catwalk above.

"I'm starting to get used to this," Trever grunted as he jumped down onto the catwalk.

There. Ferus saw the small, grated door at the end of an open stairway. He ran up and put out a hand, hoping that the Force would be there. The grated door popped off. He and Trever jumped inside, and he replaced the grate.

The tunnel was dark, but after a moment he could see. Avoiding the circuits and wires, they began to crawl down the tunnel.

"This runs in the wall," he said in a whisper. "So tread lightly."

He pictured where they were now, on the same level as Yoda's private quarters. When he thought they were near the door, he held up a hand and Trever stopped behind him. There was a grate just ahead. Ferus bent down and looked. He was directly opposite Yoda's quarters. He could see the slats of the window blinds. The hallway was empty. He curled his fingers around the grate, ready to ease it off.

Ferus suddenly heard approaching footsteps.

Malorum. Striding in his Inquisitor's robes, an assistant hurrying by his side. Stopping outside the door of Yoda's chambers.

Ferus felt it, a slight disturbance in the Force. Obi-Wan had picked up on what he'd suspected: Malorum was Force-sensitive. He cloaked his own connection to the Force, even though Ferus doubted Malorum was adept enough to feel it.

"Don't sound the general alarm," Malorum snapped. "By all means look, but look quietly. Lord Vader has decided to pay us an unannounced visit. I don't want him to know about this until the intruders are caught."

"Yes, sir."

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Ferus felt the dark side of the Force surge in a sickening wave, so powerful he inadvertently shrank back. He knew what it meant.

The Sith Lord had arrived.

Chapter Six

Ferus's breath felt sucked from his lungs. Darth Vader was on the other side of the wall. From his position near the floor he could only see the Sith Lord's boots, but he could hear the rasp of his breath mask.

Their only hope was that Vader wasn't looking for them.

"The situation is normal, you say," Vader remarked in a deep, booming voice.

Malorum had taken a few steps forward so Ferus could no longer see him. "Yes, as you can see. I arrived a day early—I like to do that, surprise them. It keeps everyone on their toes, and it's a good way to learn things that—"

"You came back a day early because I ordered you to. If you can stop complimenting yourself long enough, perhaps you can explain why squads are patrolling the hallways."

"Strictly routine. I believe in constant readiness."

"Malorum, do you think I'm a fool?"

"Excuse me, Lord Vader?"

The power of Vader's anger filled the hallway. "This is a waste of time, and I hate wasting time. I put up with you because you are useful...for now. So I give you a choice. Tell me the truth, or continue your lies."

Ferus could almost feel Malorum's calculations. The beat went on a little too long.

"Two intruders were spotted and are being tracked," Malorum finally said. "I assure you they will be found. You see, in a way, this proves the success of my plan to trap the Jedi. One of the intruders has a lightsaber."

"Really."

"So the rumors we spread worked."

"In order for a trap to work it must capture its prey. You do not have a Jedi in custody. Instead, someone is still on the loose."

There was a note of false lightness now in Malorum's voice. "Temporarily, Lord Vader, I assure you."

"Assurances don't interest me."

Lord Vader sounded almost...bored. He treated Malorum with contempt. Ferus had heard that Malorum was Lord Vader's special pet, his protégé. Obviously this was a piece of unfounded gossip.

"And I recall," Vader continued, "that you let a Jedi slip through your fingers on Bellassa. And now there is another Jedi somewhere on Coruscant."

"I have a spy who has infiltrated that Jedi's group. I am waiting for a report—"

"Your tedious obsession with trapping Jedi has led you to neglect your orders. I have given you a simple task—to clean up Coruscant, level by level, down to the very crust, until it is totally under our domination. You were to ferret out every possible pocket of resistance. You were to plan a strike and wipe out the Erased. We can't have resisters turning into heroes."

"Now just a minute, Lord Vader," Malorum said. "Coruscant is hardly an ordinary assignment."

"If you are not capable of the job, I'll find someone else to do it."

"Of course I am capable, Lord Vader—"

Jude Watson

"Then do it and do it now. You want to rid yourself of intruders? Blow up the Temple."

Ferus stiffened.

"Blow it up?" Malorum asked.

"Why not?"

"But my private office is here! Valuable records would be lost."

"You overemphasize your own importance."

Ferus could actually hear the breath that hissed out of Malorum's lungs. "I see what you're doing. You're trying to discredit me in the eyes of the Emperor. You want to destroy my work, my files..." Then he stopped. "Wait. I see now. You weren't serious."

"Interesting what has just now emerged, isn't it? You have files here that have not been banked with Imperial security? That is a violation of the Emperor's directives."

This is a battle, Ferus thought. Malorum wants Vader's job. He wants to be the Emperor's pet. And Vader knows exactly what he's up to.

Now there was an element of smugness in Malorum's tone. "I have permission from the Emperor himself to keep files private that I feel could jeopardize an ongoing investigation."

"Do I need to remind you of your own inferiority?"

Vader's anger served to quash Malorum's assurance. It was a frightening thing to feel it turned on you, Ferus reflected. He was glad he was behind the panel.

"I have no secrets from you, Lord Vader. There are reports that you haven't seen yet, files that need additional notes...I have spies everywhere on Coruscant, as you know. Reports on our progress on surveillance in the sublevels..."

"At last you're telling me something I want to know."

"Not to mention certain delicate matters I've been pursuing for your sake alone, Lord Vader. For example, the rumors about Polis Massa..."

Ferus strained to hear. There it was again—Polis Massa. Something was at stake, something big, but he didn't know what.

If Malorum thought he was going to impress Darth Vader, he was wrong. His boast had the opposite effect. Ferus could feel it now, the slow burn of Vader's rage as it built.

"Lord Vader—"

Malorum's voice was hoarse, as though he was gasping for breath. Still, Ferus could hear the fear in it.

"I...beg...you—"

A strange thing was happening. The grating in front of Ferus was vibrating. Then the actual wall was vibrating. He heard a cracking sound. Vader was allowing his rage to build.

"Do not ever mention that place again."

"Of course, Lord Vader."

Across the hallway, Ferus could see that the windows of Yoda's quarters were vibrating. Suddenly the door blew in. He saw a chair sail across the room and heard it slam against a wall. Part of the ceiling cracked and cables crashed down.

Ferus signaled to Trever and began to crawl backward.

The windows shattered. The grate blew out, along with a large chunk of the wall. Ferus and Trever were exposed.

Chapter Seven

Ferus and Trever tried to pull back amidst shards of glass and looked straight up into the black breath mask of Darth Vader. Malorum was hanging in the air, a victim of Vader's wrath, his face almost purple.

Vader released his Force-hold, and Malorum fell to the floor with a croaking sound.

For a moment, no one moved.

Vader looked down at him, and Ferus looked up, and everything inside him dissolved into pure fear. He looked into that black mirrored mask and wondered who the being behind it really was. Half living, half mechanical? He didn't know.

Somehow training kicked in. He had a moment, and it spun out into enough time. Ferus knew he didn't have enough power to fight a Sith. Not even close. But he couldn't let Darth Vader dominate the Force, either. He reached out for the Force and was hit by a surprising wave. It grew in intensity and power, the most powerful surge he had ever felt, as if Yoda himself was here to help him. It felt almost as though it was *directed* at him, emanating from Yoda's room.

Ferus rode a wave of the Force, grabbing Trever with one arm and jumping out to snatch at the flexible cable that had fallen from the ceiling. It was still attached above, and it gave him

something to swing on. Together with Trevor he swung out through the broken wall of glass, and then let go. He knew the Force would carry him.

He and Trevor soared over the atrium and landed on the other side. He could feel the dark side of the Force behind him, but he paid it no mind. He simply ran, all the while knowing that if Vader wanted him, he would have gotten him. Simple as that.

Perhaps he was letting Ferus and Trevor go in order to humiliate Malorum. Or test him. Or because he didn't care that much. Whatever the reason, Ferus grabbed on to it and ran with it.

Alarms sounded.

Now the entire Temple was on alert. Ferus switched to a hallway that he knew was a shortcut to the analysis rooms. It was dark and dusty; the Imperials didn't use it. Using his lightsaber for light, he led the way. This could buy them a few precious seconds. In his mind, he was forming a desperate plan. The only way they were getting out of here was if they did it fast; Ferus knew he wouldn't be able to hide for very long. There was no question that Malorum wouldn't allow himself to fail in front of his master.

"What's the plan?" Trevor asked, breathing hard. "The sooner we get away from that Vader guy, the better. Can we review? Scary! Creepy!"

"We have to steal a ship," Ferus said. "The new landing platform lies directly below a playroom that the younglings used. During surveillance I saw that the window is partially blown out."

"I'm sort of sensing that we'll be jumping out a window again," Trevor said.

"Well, I'm hoping there will be a nifty little speeder underneath us."

"You know, you keep forgetting something. I'm not a Jedi. I can't do all this leaping and landing."

"You're doing just fine. Hurry up."

Jude Watson

Ferus slowed down as they reached the playroom. He crept forward. Just as he'd hoped, the room wasn't being used. A cold wind blew in from the broken window. Followed closely by Trever, he stepped inside.

A wave of horror hit him, hard, directly in the chest.

Something happened here.

The younglings...

How had he pushed that thought away? He had imagined, somehow, that the Empire wouldn't target the young. He had imagined the younglings had simply...run away.

They did not run away.

Youth, age, the sick, the weak...they do not enter into the Sith's calculations. They simply go after what they want.

Don't think of it. If you think of it now, it might break you.

He walked slowly to the window. It felt as though he was kicking through ashes. The toys were still scattered about, the climbing apparatus the younglings had used, the practice lightsabers, the lasertoys, all broken now.

What kind of monster would be capable of this?

Trever lurked behind a fallen column, keeping well out of sight as he spied out the window. "They're closing down the landing platform," he said. "Must be a security measure."

Shaking off the dark memories in the room, Ferus joined him. While they'd been inside the Temple, dusk had fallen. Lights were blinking on all over the levels below them. "Look at that officer, arguing. The code is yellow, not red. See the light at the side of the platform? So my guess is that they let him go."

The Force surged. It was a warning. Ferus was startled at its directness. Much of the time he felt he was groping for the Force through a fog. He realized that his Force connection was stronger while he was here. Something in him still responded to this place, still gained strength from it.

Malorum was close.

He looked around the room. He had seconds. There had to be something here he could use. His mind was working fast. He

needed something to distract the pilot below. All he needed was an instant.

He scooped up one of the youngling's toys. It was used for Force practice. In the beginning, the lasertoy would fly in a straight line. As the child grew in expertise, he or she would use the Force to make it dip and roll. The more it cavorted, the more laserlights blinked on and off. Ferus checked it. A few lights blinked at him. It still worked. This little toy had made it through the destruction all around it.

He stood by the broken window. The officer below had been cleared to take off. Ferus let the laser-toy fly.

Now all he needed was the Force.

He felt it flow effortlessly between him and the toy. He sent the toy spinning and diving. The lights blinked and flashed, faster and faster, the colors penetrating the gloom.

The guards below pointed and raised their blaster rifles. He could see that they were puzzled, not knowing what the object could be. Was it a weapon? The pilot hesitated, unsure of what to do.

"Hang onto me like a monkey-lizard," he told Trever.

Trever leaped on his back, winding his long arms and legs around him. Ferus positioned himself on the ledge. Everyone below was looking at the lasertoy. He jumped. The Force helped him slow and guide his descent.

The speeder was still hovering near the guards. Obviously the officer wanted the protection of their weaponry before he took off. Ferus kept the lasertoy spinning even as he guided his leap.

It all happened in less than an instant. He landed on the back of the speeder. Trever slithered off his back and into the backseat.

Ferus picked up the officer under the arms. The officer was too startled to struggle. "I need a ride," Ferus said.

He tossed him from the vehicle. They were still hovering only meters from the platform; the officer wasn't hurt, but he wasn't

Jude Watson

very happy about his rough landing. He, too, drew his blaster and began firing furiously.

“Time to go,” Trever said, ducking under the seat.

Blaster fire streaked around them as the guards realized what had happened. Ferus pushed the engines and they zoomed off.

Chapter Eight

What now? Trever wondered. With every new idea Ferus had, he found himself spinning in atmospheric storms, dangling from towers, and stealing Imperial speeders. He didn't know if he was having the time of his life or if he was simply crazy for sticking around.

He wondered for the thousandth time why he was here. Every time he had a chance to bolt, he said no.

The truth was, the galaxy became such a big place when you had nowhere to go.

And anything he could do to destroy the Empire that had destroyed his family—he'd do it.

"We know now that Malorum believes the Jedi is alive and on Coruscant," Ferus said. "We'd better ditch this speeder fast and start looking."

"Now?" Trever asked as Ferus piloted the speeder to a landing at a crowded platform. "Don't you ever stop?"

"Not having a good time?"

"Food and sleep would be nice."

"No sleep, not yet. But I can get you some food where we're headed. If he's still there." So much had changed, Ferus thought—he didn't expect anything to be the same. But he couldn't stop hoping.

Jude Watson

It was gone. Where Dexter's Diner once occupied its tiny space there was now an empty lot. Ferus stood, looking at the space where it had been. It had been razed. Why?

He didn't know Dexter Jettster all that well. He'd only met him a couple of times. But Obi-Wan had told him to look up Dexter if he ever needed information or help, and to tell him that Obi-Wan had sent him. The fact that Obi-Wan trusted Dexter with the fact that he was still alive meant something.

Ferus kicked at a piece of rubble. He wasn't the only one who knew Dexter Jettster. His diner was known throughout Galactic City. Someone had to know what had happened to him.

A woman in a red cloak passed by and smiled at him. "I've seen that expression on so many faces," she said. "Looking for sliders, right?"

"They were the best in the galaxy. What happened?"

"Disappeared," she said. "Happened the same night the Empire destroyed his diner."

"Why?"

"Accused of subversion, aiding and abetting enemies of the Empire."

"The usual," Ferus said bitterly.

The woman gave him a sharp look. "Be careful what you say," she said softly.

There was a human man walking near them. Probably just someone on his way home after a long day of work. But you never knew who could be an Imperial spy.

Ferus waited until the man had passed. "Do you know what happened to Dexter?"

"Rumors," she said. "Coruscant is always full of rumors. Some say he was arrested. Some say he is dead. Some say he travels the galaxy, just as he used to, going from job to job on energy-harvesting freighters. And some say he's joined the Erased."

That term again. "The Erased?" Ferus asked.

She gave him a curious look. "You don't know about them?"

“I...I left Coruscant a long time ago.”

She gave him an appraising look. “Well, if you’re back here, you should know about them. The Enemy Eradication Order of Coruscant was issued shortly after the Emperor took over. It was specifically designed to target those who had been active in the Republic. At first, it was just surveillance. They’d have to check in with an Imperial officer every week. They were forbidden to travel. But soon surveillance led to arrest, arrest to death or a living death, so...some engineered their own disappearance. They help each other now. You can get rid of your name and your ID docs and any record of your existence and simply...”

“Disappear.”

“As if you’d never been born. They say they live below. Far below, in one of the sublevels.”

“I see. I’m glad for Dexter, if he did make it out. He was a friend.” Their words had passed back and forth, but something else was going on underneath. She was sizing him up, trying to decide what he was. And he was telling her, with every word, that she could trust him. He knew that she knew more than she was telling.

“It’s dangerous,” she said. She glanced around furtively.

“Everything is dangerous, these days.”

Her brown eyes were wary, and she appeared to make a decision. “My advice, of course, is not to go in the orange district near sunset.”

“Thank you for the advice,” Ferus said, as she nodded briefly and walked away. Did he imagine it, or did she breathe “good luck” as she passed him?

Most of his missions as a Jedi apprentice had taken him to the Mid-Rim worlds and beyond. He knew that a few of the other Master-Padawan teams, such as Anakin and Obi-Wan, had more experience on Coruscant. Ferus didn’t know the underworld of Coruscant very well. But even he had heard of the orange district.

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It wasn't an official name. You wouldn't find it on a map. It had gotten that name from the residents' habit of replacing the Senate-issued street glowlights with orange ones that lent the passages and walkways a lurid air. Every time the officials had changed the lights back to the clear ones, the residents somehow managed to return them to orange, block by block and street by street. At last the Senate had given up on the problem and let the orange district be.

Ferus had never actually been there, but he wasn't worried about finding his way around. This was part of what he did, go into dicey situations and try to find out information without making too many stupid mistakes.

Sometimes he did better than others.

They took an air taxi down to the district. The driver zoomed off as fast as he could. Who could blame him?

There was little illumination here except for the garish laserlights that flashed invitations to various clubs and bars and, of course, the orange glowlights. Down here, it was never silent. The press of beings made walking difficult. Those who couldn't afford the upper levels lived here, in small cubes that passed for apartments in huge structures housing thousands. Many of them, Ferus was sure, were scheming how to make their way to the upper levels to live underneath the sun again.

"Smart," Trever said. "Hide in plain sight. Even the Empire would have trouble tracking someone here. Can you imagine making a house-to-house search? It would take about a thousand years."

They continued down the walkway. Blocks of compressed garbage towered above them. Although it had been sanitized in the processing, it still gave off a faint smell.

"I think I just lost my appetite," Trever said.

"We're in the quadrant now," Ferus said. "And it's sunset."

"How can you tell? It's always orange down here."

Ferus gazed around. He could go into a shop or sit on a bench and wait until someone approached him. In districts like

these, beings always had things to sell, and that always included information. But maybe a café was best.

"It's better not to advertise that you're a stranger here, but not seem too at home, either," he told Trever as he looked around. "If we can find a small café..."

"Ferus..."

"...it has to be the right one."

"Ferus! Look."

Ferus followed Trever's jerk of his chin. Down a particularly dangerous-appearing alley, a small laser-light hung over a door. It would be easy to miss, thanks to the all-enveloping orange glow in the air. It was a round red light with cracks emanating from it. The cracks made the light appear to be a dying sun.

"Sunset," Trever said. "In the orange district."

"Maybe. Certainly worth a try."

Ferus led the way down the alley. "I'll go in first. You stay out here."

"I'm not sure about this," Trever said. "Maybe I should hit the street, pick up something I could pretend to sell—dataparts, for example, and—"

"Pick up dataparts? Don't you mean *steal* them?"

"Don't be so precise. My point is, I'll get inside pretending to be a seller and get a good look around. Nobody ever suspects a street kid."

"No, I'll go," Ferus said. "I've got experience with this. It's got to be some sort of cantina. You can always find someone to help you in a cantina, if you approach it the right way. Wait here."

He pushed open the door...and walked straight into the tusk of a Whiphid as it picked him up and threw him out the door.

Ferus landed hard. He felt his side gingerly. The Whiphid had barely nicked him with his tusk. Still, he could feel the burn. Thank the stars for small favors.

Trever strolled over to look down at him. "Oh," he said, "so that's how it's done."

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The Whiphid crossed the distance in two gigantic strides. He towered over them. “This is a private club! Get your carcass back to the hole it crawled out of!”

“Hey, Tooth-Face!” Trever shot back angrily. “Who do you think you’re talking to?”

“They don’t like it when you call them that,” Ferus murmured. “So I wouldn’t—”

The Whiphid picked up Trever with his clawed hands and tossed him on top of Ferus. Ferus felt his breath puff out in a *whoosh* at the impact.

“Call the garbage compactors!” the Whiphid roared to someone inside. “We’ve got some trash!”

A slender human male in an ankle-length coat stood in the doorway. Ferus recognized the telltale signs of a slythmonger, a being who bought and sold narcotics and potions, sometimes without regard to whether they were deadly or not.

I can take them both, Ferus thought. *The Whiphid just took me by surprise. I can handle this.*

The slythmonger laughed. “Come on, sweetblossoms. We’ve got two live ones!”

A tall Bothan and nine—no, ten—other beings charged out the door.

Okay. Maybe not as easy as I thought.

Trever rolled off him. Ferus sprang to his feet, his hands held up, palms out. “Hey, I’m just looking for some information.”

“And what makes you think we have any to give?” the slythmonger asked.

“Not give. Sell.”

“He’s got credits!” a tall human man called gleefully. “Get him!”

As if in one mass, the homicidal crew headed toward them.

He didn’t want to use his lightsaber. News would get back quickly that a Jedi had been spotted. He didn’t want to tip off Malorum. He knew now that Malorum believed Fy-Tor was alive, and that would only endanger her.

Still, he didn't particularly want to get himself and Trever killed.

Trever had the most finely honed sense of self-preservation he'd ever seen. Within seconds, he had scurried over and rolled under a burned-out speeder.

"Wooo," a woman with a crisscrossing holster packed with blasters yelled. "Look at the little womp rat run! Get him!"

Ferus leaped and landed on top of the speeder. He drew his blaster. "You'll have to get through me."

With a slither and a clatter and a clang, everyone's weapons came out. Pocket blasters. A blaster rifle. Vibroshivs. Vibroblades. And even what looked like an Imperial force pike.

"Gladly," the Bothan said.

Suddenly a deep laugh rolled out from the dark interior.

"Would you mind not killing the poor fellow, chums?" Dexter Jettster said. "I think I might know him."

Chapter Nine

Dexter beckoned to them with three of his four hands. Ferus and Trever stepped uneasily into the dark bar. Only a few steps behind them, the disappointed crew followed, muttering darkly about what they'd missed out on.

They sat at a small table that was dwarfed by Dex's bulk. Waving the others away, he fixed his friendly, beady eyes on Ferus.

"Ferus Olin, is it? I remember when Siri would bring you by. And here I thought you left Coruscant behind forever. That would have been a smart move. And who is this with you?"

"Trever Flume," Trever supplied.

"Well, Trever Flume and Ferus Olin, what brings you down to these parts?"

"Obi-Wan said you would help me," Ferus said. "I just left him a few days ago."

Dexter leaned backward. All four hands went to his chest as he let out a gusty breath. "You should prepare a fellow for news like that. He's alive. That's good to hear. Where is he?"

"I can't tell you that," Ferus said. "But he sends his regards."

"Well, if you see him, tell him Dexter Jettster is still his friend."

"He'll be glad to hear you're well."

“Well?” Dexter chortled. “I wouldn’t go that far. Not that far, at all. But I’m surviving.”

“You’re one of the Erased.”

“Erased I am. No name, no background, nothing to declare except—I’m alive.” He chuckled again, but this time ruefully. “Obi-Wan spoke too soon. I doubt I have help to give you. But if you’ve come to be Erased, I can put you in touch with the right channels. I can find you a place to stay for a bit—not too long, because the Erased have to keep moving. Some of us keep track of one another, some of us disappear. There are no judgments down here. Whatever you do to survive, you do.”

Ferus glanced over at the long metal bar. The group that had followed the Whiphid outside were lined up against it, their backs to the bar, their eyes on him. The Whiphid stood behind the bar, moving a dirty rag back and forth and watching, too.

“Now, don’t worry about them. They’re just looking out for me. It’s best to intimidate any visitors. Creatures come down here looking for thrills, and we send ’em back to where they came from. A little worse for wear, but alive. Ha! Ha! If I say you’re all right, you’ll be welcome enough.”

“Who are they?” Trever asked curiously.

“A mixed lot, I’d say,” Dexter answered. “Any-one the Empire was hounding. Heroes and villains. Some journalists, some former Republic army officers. Maybe some criminals mixed in.”

Ferus gave a sidelong glance at the slythmonger. “I noticed that.”

Dexter slapped both knees with four hands. “Hah! You’re speaking of Keets.”

“Yeah, the one who couldn’t wait to run us through with a vibroshiv,” Trever said.

“Ah, his growl is worse than his chomp,” Dex said. “And he wasn’t a criminal in the old days. He was a journalist, writing for the *Coruscant Holo Net*. One of the first to ask why Palpatine was

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grabbing all the power even while he was smiling at us, telling us he was protecting us.”

“Not Keets Freely?” Ferus asked, astonished. He had read Freely’s commentaries during the Clone Wars.

“The very same. And the Bothan fellow with the tangled mane—that’s Oryon, one of the best spies the Republic ever had. The human female with the spiked hair-horns? Rhya Taloon, the Senator from Agridorn. Can’t go back to her homeworld—she’s got a death mark on her head. So she escaped. See that Svivreni? He was a Senate aide. And the tall humanoid? An officer in the Army of the Republic. Not a clone. Don’t ask about the brothers—the ones standing next to each other who look alike? They haven’t told us who they are.”

Ferus looked around the room again, this time in surprise. “Here it is,” he said, excitement underneath his words. “Right here, in this room. Seeds for the rebellion. Here is where it will begin, in places like this.”

Dexter laughed. “We’re a long way from rebellion, young Olin. We’re just trying to survive. Coruscant used to be a decent place to live, if you didn’t mind a billion beings breathing your air. Things have changed. There are spies around, of course. But even ordinary Coruscanti just trying to get by are having a real hard time. Bribes and intimidation—that’s a way of life now.”

“We were just at the Jedi Temple,” Ferus said. “We’ve seen the damage there.”

“They say there are Jedi imprisoned there.”

“There aren’t.”

“Didn’t think there would be. That’s why I warned the other one.”

Ferus’s alertness sharpened. “What other one?”

“She didn’t give me her name.”

“A Jedi—a human woman, with a small facial marking on her forehead—”

“That’s the one. She heard I’d been a friend to the Jedi and sought me out. That was before I Erased myself. I couldn’t give

her much—I was surprised that any Jedi was alive at all. But I did tell her not to go to the Temple. She went down below instead, into the deepest sublevels.”

“Do you know where, exactly?” Ferus asked.

“No idea, my friend. But recently I got a message. If I ever need her, she said, I should look for Solace.”

“Solace?”

“A word I’ve been hearing more and more lately.”

“But where is it?”

Dex shrugged. “Don’t know. I haven’t needed her yet.”

Ferus looked around. “There’s something you should know. The Empire is planning a strike down here. They want to wipe out the Erased. You’re all becoming bothersome to the new regime. They want to control Coruscant all the way down to the crust.”

Dex stroked his chin with his thick, gnarled fingers. “That won’t be easy, even for the Empire.”

“Darth Vader has made it his personal mission.”

“Darth Vader? That’s another story.” Dex frowned in thought, the deep furrows in his face collapsing until his eyes disappeared. Then he looked up again at Ferus. “You’ll need a guide if you’re going below.”

“Do you have someone in mind?”

“Maybe, maybe. But first, a small parley with the gang.”

Dex signaled to the others and they retired to another room in the back of the cantina. It turned out that the building was an old relay power station, and it still held abandoned turbines. The Erased had hooked up their own power system here, and the air was filled with steam and a constant humming noise.

“Makes it hard for surveillance to get a fix on voices,” Dex explained to Ferus and Trever. “You’ve got some here who are a little touchy about being overheard.”

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Seven of the Erased sat at the table along with Dex. The others had melted away, not even willing to sit and talk with outsiders. The Whiphid stayed at the bar.

The Erased all turned to Dexter to begin, and Ferus realized that he was a kind of unofficial leader here.

“My friend here is Ferus Olin, a former Jedi.”

“Jedi apprentice,” Ferus corrected.

“And this is his friend...”

Trever chimed in with his name.

“Ferus tells me that the Empire is planning to try to eradicate us, and I trust his information,” Dexter continued. “We all knew it would happen. Just sooner than we’d like.”

“We’re not prepared for this,” the Svivreni said. He was stocky, with a narrow, furred face. His hair reached the back of his knees and was held back with a thick metal band.

“This is Curran Caladian,” Dexter told Ferus and Trever.

“I knew a Tyro Caladian,” Ferus said. Tyro had been a friend of Obi-Wan’s, and a good source of information. Ferus had met him a number of times. He had been one of twenty-one beings killed in the great Senate massacre, a few years before the Clone Wars began.

“My cousin,” Curran said. “We started out as aides at the Senate together.” He gave Ferus a look of recognition. “You were there that day—at the massacre. You saved Palpatine’s life.”

Ferus nodded. He had reasons to remember this. He knew now that he couldn’t have possibly saved Palpatine’s life that day. Palpatine, he felt sure, had been supremely in control at every moment, had perhaps even foreseen the attacks and turned them to his advantage. Certainly his courage under fire had netted him more supporters than ever.

“Is that so?” Dex slapped four hands on his massive legs. “If only you’d moved a little to the left that day, Ferus, we all might be in better shape! Ha!”

Ferus acknowledged the joke with a slight smile. He felt that nothing he could have done that day would have made a difference.

“Back to the subject at hand,” Dex said. “Or hands. Seems to me we have some decisions to make. First, we should warn the others. Everyone is on their own, of course. But if some of us can help, we should help.”

“Help how?” The tall man who Dex had called a former officer spoke up.

“Offer the Erased a place to go if they need it. Leave the orange district.”

The man nodded. “We’ve got to go deeper.”

“I agree with Hume,” Rhya Taloon said. Ferus could not connect the image of this woman, her silver hair twisted into horns, holsters crisscrossing her chest, with the image of a Senator.

“Our strength lies in our bond,” the Bothan Oryon said. “We should find a place we’ll all be safe. Not just us, but any Erased who wish to join us.”

The two young men who Dexter had referred to as brothers sat together. They followed the conversation carefully, looking from one speaker to another at the same moment. They nodded in agreement.

“Gilly and Spence are right,” Dexter said, even though the two young men hadn’t spoken. “Now what about Solace?”

Rhya Taloon spoke up. “I’ve heard rumors about it. A kind of refuge, they say. Secret. Safe. Impossible to find, yet many find their way there.”

“I say we find it,” Dexter said. “Ferus has got the skills to protect us on the journey.”

Me? Ferus thought. Since when did I volunteer?

Keets Freely gave a long look around at the sweeping machines, the pools of rusty water, and the grimy walls. “And leave all this?” he joked.

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Wait a second, Ferus thought. *I thought I was getting a guide, not leading a group.* He shot a look at Dexter. His eyes were twinkling...if you could say such a thing were possible for a Besalisk's beady eyes.

Oh, well. He'd been outmaneuvered. But he didn't mind doing Dexter a favor. He'd do it for Obi-Wan's sake. And to help find the lost Jedi.

Trever didn't mind. That was clear by the grin on his face. He liked these people. No doubt they reminded him of the black marketers he lived with on Bellassa.

"Take a vote, then," Dexter suggested.

Slowly, weapons were raised. All seven Erased agreed to go.

"I'll be staying here," Dex said. "I'm not as mobile as I was. I'll warn the others to stay low—well, lower than normal—and I'll wait to hear from you."

As they went to collect their weapons and belongings, Ferus talked to Dexter.

"Don't think I didn't notice how you trapped me into this," he said.

"Where's your spirit of adventure, young Olin?" Dexter chortled and slapped him on the back, sending him shooting forward. He saved himself from crashing into a column just in time.

"I should tell you something, Dexter. If you're relying on the skills of a Jedi, I dropped out of the Order some time ago. I'm a little rusty."

"I'd rather have a Jedi at half-power than a battalion of stormtroopers any day," Dexter assured him. "And call me Dex. I have a feeling this is the beginning of a long friendship."

The Erased left to gather the few belongings they needed to take, and Ferus took the opportunity to gain some privacy and contact Obi-Wan. He withdrew into a little-used part of the space and took out his comlink.

They had agreed on a coded signal before they parted, and Obi-Wan answered at once. A flickering mini-hologram appeared, and Obi-Wan flipped back his hood.

"News?"

"Hey, Obi-Wan, glad to see you, too."

Obi-Wan frowned. "You are supposed to contact me for emergencies only."

"Well, it's not an emergency, so I guess you don't want to hear what I have to say. Bye!"

"Hello, Ferus," Obi-Wan said wearily. "How are you?"

"Nothing a few days of rest on Belazura wouldn't cure. I'm here with your friend Dexter Jettster. He sends his regards."

"Dex! I'm glad to hear it."

"He's got a death mark on his head, but he's alive. Listen, I broke into the Temple with Trever and overheard something of interest about Polis Massa."

Obi-Wan straightened. "Yes?"

"Darth Vader doesn't care about it. Whatever it is. In fact, he forbade Malorum to pursue any inquiry."

"That's good."

"No, that's bad. Because Malorum is trying to become the Emperor's right-hand man and boot out Vader. So he's going to pursue it."

"Do you know what he knows?"

"No, I didn't get that far. The wall caved in."

"You have to find out. You must be alert for any inquiry into the death of Senator Padm  Amidala as well. Do you think you could get back into the Temple?"

"Trever and I barely got *out*."

Obi-Wan folded his hands into the sleeves of his cloak. "You know I can't leave here, Ferus. And I don't want to put you and Trever in danger. But Malorum has to be stopped."

"I'll stop him for you, Obi-Wan," Ferus said. "I don't know how, I don't even know why. But I'll do it."

"May the Force be with you."

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“You know, I’m beginning to realize that it actually *is* with me. Still.”

“Of course it is, Ferus.” Obi-Wan’s voice was warm now. “Depend on it.”

Chapter Ten

For the first time since he'd left the streets of Bellassa, Trever felt at home.

The Erased reminded him of the friends he'd made in the black market. Sure, you didn't want to ask the brothers, Gilly and Spence, what they did before they were Erased, but that was fine with him. He was used to people concealing their pasts.

Gilly and Spence didn't say much. They were short and compact and heavily armed with various makeshift weapons they trusted more than any blaster. Keets Freely was the talkative one. That guy could chew your ear off with facts about the Coruscant underlevels: How they'd always existed outside of the law. How security didn't penetrate this far down. Millions of inhabitants relied on their own defensive skills or teams of vigilantes to protect neighborhoods and individual apartment structures with their hundreds of inhabitants.

According to Keets, ever since the Most Evil Empire took over, things had only become worse. Before the Clone Wars, the Senate tried to keep the place from falling apart, at least. They sent droid teams down for occasional repairs. They even set up med clinics for the poor slobs who had to live there. But now, with the new greedy Senate, nobody cared. So the millions of

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beings slammed into the sublevels traveled in packs and kept arsenals of weapons to protect themselves.

Trever could have skipped the lecture and picked up the main point—watch your back.

He noticed that Ferus wasn't too happy about leading the Erased down. They had traveled for hours until they were far away from the Senate and Galactic City, and all Ferus could think about was the Jedi he was searching for. Honestly, he was a little obsessive about it. But still, Trever had never met anyone he felt he could depend on like Ferus. It was worth sticking around.

Their plans were loose. They had to be. The group had decided to head down, all of them packed into one large speeder, and pick up information along the way. Since there were so many rumors about Solace, they felt certain that they would find the way there.

Of course, some of the rumors were pretty extreme.

Number one: Solace was a place on the crust that had escaped the monolithic building boom on Coruscant. It had trees and lakes and was open to the sky far above, with nothing on top of it.

And if you believe that, Trever thought, you believe in space angels.

Number two: Solace was built centuries ago on the crust, a wondrous place of palaces and towers where all were welcome, and all were cherished, and all were free.

Right, and the Emperor is a humble guy looking out for everyone's well-being and the galaxy is a blooming garden.

The only rumor Trever truly believed was the fact they already knew: Solace was hard to find.

At the end of a long day of learning basically nothing, Rhya Taloon unstrapped her holsters to make herself comfortable and stretched out on the sleep couch in the guesthouse they'd arranged to stay in for the night. Gilly and Spence were busy

cleaning their weapons while Trever lay down on the other sleep couch, and Ferus spread his cloak on the floor for a bed.

"This is getting us nowhere," Rhya announced to the ceiling. She placed the toe of her boot on the opposite heel and kicked off one boot, then the other. They landed with a thump on the floor.

"You've got to ask a lot of questions before you get real answers, sweetblossom," Keets said as he sat astride a chair. "We may not see it, but we have pieces of the puzzle."

"We do?" She waved a hand in the air. "All I heard today was noise."

"There's one thing we keep hearing. The crust. It's all the way down—some say it's even *below* the crust."

"That's true," Ferus said. "That's the common thread."

Oryon shook back his tangled mane of hair. He was in his usual resting position, squatting on the floor. It looked uncomfortable to Trever, but Oryon seemed to find it relaxing. "There is usually a kernel of truth in even the most exaggerated rumor. Keets might be right."

Gilly and Spence looked up from their weapons to nod.

"There's got to be a first time," Hume said. He was the tall human man who'd been a Republic army officer.

Keets saluted him. "Even a broken chrono is right twice a day."

"So we should go straight to the crust," Curran said. "Stop wasting time."

"Sounds like a plan," Hume said. "I hate to waste time."

Everyone looked at Ferus. "I agree," he said.

"Anybody ever been that deep before?" Keets asked.

"Are you kidding?" Rhya asked. "I never made it out of Galactic City." She looked down at the holsters on the floor. "Then again, I never shot a blaster before, either."

Oryon checked his weapon. "Well, get ready. You might have plenty of opportunities soon."

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They left for the crust at first light.

They zoomed down past sublevel after sublevel. There were no space lanes here, just tricky piloting. Ferus piloted the speeder, not speaking, concentrating on avoiding the other aggressive speeders he encountered as well as broken sensors that suddenly loomed in front of him, crumbling landing platforms, and narrow passages.

Coruscant had been built from the surface up. When the levels had become too crowded to bear, more levels were built above. More buildings, more infrastructure, more power stations, more walkways. The deeper Ferus and the others went, the more ancient these structures became.

They left the speeder on a landing platform that had been shored up with timbers of durasteel and wood. Looking around, Trever could see that improvisation was the name of the game when it came to building down here.

Here at the crust, they entered a century that was committed to grandeur. These long-ago beings built their buildings out of stone, hundreds of stories high, with intricate carvings and balconies, turrets, and towers. The stone of the buildings was cracked and crumbling. Often they were reinforced with scrap metal or wood. Their streets were winding and narrow, with alleys leading off from alleys in a confusing maze.

There were no official systems here at all—no power, no water, no light, no ventilation that wasn't powered by private generators. They walked down through a narrow arched walkway. The stone beneath their feet was cracked and split, sometimes with fissures that were meters wide. They jumped when they had to and skirted the holes. They were the only beings out on the streets. Although above them the suns weren't setting, it felt like night. The air was dark and close.

This was it—the bottom of Coruscant. The lowest known level.

If they didn't find Solace here, there was nowhere else to go.

Trever hoped there was safety in numbers. The Erased looked treacherous. He couldn't imagine that anyone would want to tangle with them.

He found his steps slowing. He felt haunted by what was above. It was as though he could feel the pressure of the millions of lives above him, the millions of structures and machines, a whole impossible matrix of humming life above his head, of millions of beating hearts.

It was enough to seriously creep him out.

"You're uncharacteristically silent, young fellow." Keets fell into step beside him.

"It all feels so...heavy," Trever said.

"You mean everything above your head?" Keets laughed. "Yeah, I see what you mean. It's kind of oppressive."

"So who lives down here?" he asked.

Keets shrugged. "Immigrants from other worlds, those who came here hoping to do better. Those who lost everything, those who had nowhere else to go. Just creatures living, trying to live. And those who prey off them."

"And those looking for the wonderful world of Solace," Trever said.

Keets chuckled. Then suddenly he reached over and pushed Trever hard. Trever fell to the rough ground.

"Hey, what—"

Then he saw them. The gang had materialized, seemingly out of thin air, but Trever now saw the narrow passageway that snaked off the arched walk. Keets had pushed him out of the way of a stun dart just in time. Trever looked up and saw that Oryon had already reached for his light repeating blaster from his back holster. Keets held a blaster pistol in his hand. Now Trever saw the streaks of blaster fire in the darkness, a steady barrage, as the gang moved forward. There were at least fifteen of them, each more brutal-looking than the rest.

Ferus was already running, his lightsaber sweeping in a continually moving arc. The attackers were clearly startled at the

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ferocity and power he exhibited, not to mention the blaster fire that suddenly boomeranged back at them. They kept firing as they retreated, shouting curses at Ferus and promising to kill him.

Oryon and Hume kept up a position on Ferus's flank, each of them firing their weapons. Keets and Rhya were only slightly behind, while Gilly and Spence split up and began to chase the gang as they gave up firing and fled.

Trever started to roll to his feet. The fissures and cracks were wider here, and his foot became lodged in a crack as he moved. Annoyed, he tried to pull it out, but it was stuck. Trever squirmed closer to peer into the crack.

A thick, scaly tail had wrapped itself around his ankle.

Trever gave a yell of surprise and tried to pull his leg up. The creature wound another length around his ankle and tugged. He tried to kick at it, but it only hung on tighter.

"Ferus!" Trever called. But Ferus was ahead, with Rhya and Hume, and didn't hear him.

He looked down again, and this time he saw the dead eye of the creature staring back at him. He didn't think that the concept of mercy existed in this creature's universe.

It gave a sudden yank, and Trever dropped into the crevice up to his hips. His other leg now dangled inside the crack, and he pushed away the question of whether this creature had a mate. He kicked and twisted, hitting the creature now with one fist while with the other hand he fished for something—anything—in his utility belt.

Trever felt the familiar contours of an alpha charge.

His fingers fumbled as he tried to set the charge. He managed to do it, but the creature tugged, and the charge rolled out of his fingers and dropped into the blackness. In the flash of light he saw a reptilian body with scales that looked like duracrete. The mouth of the creature appeared to be strong enough to snap him in two.

Suddenly something whistled by his ear. He caught the glint of a vibroshiv as it wheeled through the air in a spinning, perfect

aim for the tail. It sank in up to the hilt. The thick tail suddenly unfurled, and Trevor heard the sound of the creature slithering away.

“Duracrete slug,” Keets said, holding down a hand for him and hauling him up. “About ten meters long, by the look of him. They burrow into the stone. Best to keep an eye out.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Trevor dusted off his pants.

Ferus hurried over. “What happened?”

“Nothing much. I was almost strangled by an enormous slug. Nothing for you to worry about,” Trevor said. He didn’t know why he felt so irritated that Ferus hadn’t saved him. Ferus had been walking ahead, not concerning himself with Trevor at all.

“Hey, sorry. Thanks,” Ferus said to Keets.

“Sure. You owe me a vibroshiv,” Keets grinned, his teeth white through the dirt streaked on his face.

“We found a place that might provide some information,” Ferus said.

The others had paused in front of two crumbling stone columns. A sputtering laserlight sign read: UNDERWORLD INN. They regarded it as Ferus, Trevor, and Keets walked up.

“Not your most premier establishment,” Rhya said.

“We do need a bed for the night,” Ferus said.

“And where there’s beds, there’s grog,” Keets said. “And where’s there’s grog, there’s gossip.”

“Let’s give it a try,” Ferus said. “But keep your weapons close.”

They pushed open the stone door. They walked into a large circular space formed by towering arches. The stone floor and stone ceiling made their footsteps echo. Huge alien gargoyles leered over their heads with what looked like malicious intent.

“Homey,” Hume remarked.

They approached a small battered desk that was dwarfed by its surroundings. A clerk sat behind it, fast asleep. Ferus cleared his throat, but he didn’t stir.

Jude Watson

Oryon slammed the hilt of his blaster rifle down on the desk, and the clerk awoke with a start. “Fire!” he shouted.

“No fire,” Ferus said. “Just some customers.”

“Oh.” The clerk straightened. “Ah, we only have a couple of rooms available. You’ll have to double up.”

“Fine.”

“Costs extra for towels and water.”

“Extra for water?”

“Hard to get water down here.”

“All right, all right.”

Ferus was about to produce his false ID docs, but the clerk waved a hand to dismiss him. “Just credits. We don’t need ID docs.”

“I thought it was the law.”

The clerk raised an eyebrow at him, as though Ferus was a new recruit into a very old army. “There’s no law down here. If you haven’t figured that out yet, I feel sorry for you.”

They paid the credits, and then Hume asked, “We’ve got some dry throats here. Any recommendations?”

The clerk shrugged a shoulder in the direction of a doorway.

They pushed open the door and went inside. The cantina was small but the ceiling was high, casting deep shadows throughout the space. To Ferus’s surprise, the place was almost full. Humanoids and other creatures sat at the bar or at small tables that hugged the shadows. Weapons were prominently displayed on the tables.

“Reminds me of a place I used to go in Galactic City called the ’Dor, only worse,” Keets observed.

Ferus nodded. He’d been to the ’Dor with Siri, as a Padawan who had tried very hard not to be intimidated by the atmosphere. The dregs of the galaxy went there to drink, buy or sell information, and hire bounty hunters. It had once been called the Splendor until most of its laser letters had shorted out, and everyone just called it the ’Dor.

"I'd say we should have a seat," Hume advised. "We're attracting a bit of attention here."

"Not necessarily a bad thing," Oryon said. "It might get us some answers."

They took over several small tables and ordered drinks and food. They saw that they were being observed. Ferus took a small sip of his drink, then got up and brought it to the bar to see if anyone was in the mood to chat. Meanwhile, Keets struck up a conversation with the table next door.

They ate the food and finished four pots of tea and talked to almost every person in the bar, but no one was able to get directions to Solace. Everyone had heard of it, but no one knew where it was. Finally, the cantina cleared out and they had to admit defeat. Trever had been feeling woozy for some time. He yawned.

"We might as well get some sleep," Ferus said.

The room was large, with sleep couches and one receptacle and outlet that dribbled pale yellow water. The couches were just planks with a blanket on top. Not the most uncomfortable bed Ferus had ever slept on, but it was definitely in the top ten.

He turned on his side and looked at Trever's tousled hair sticking up from his blanket. He felt bad about not being the one to help Trever earlier. He'd made sure Trever was safe during the battle, then concentrated on their attackers. He had heard Trever's cry, but by the time he'd started to run, Keets was already there.

He couldn't be there for him every time. Or so he tried to tell himself.

He didn't know where his responsibility to the boy began or ended. He knew, of course, that Trever was hardly as self-sufficient as he professed to be. Even though the boy had lived on his own for years, he occasionally needed guidance, someone to watch over him.

Jude Watson

Was that his job?

If he were still a Jedi, if the galaxy hadn't changed, he'd be old enough to have a Padawan now. But Trever wasn't his Padawan. Ferus didn't have the connection with him that a Master Jedi would. He didn't have the link that he'd had with Siri. He lost track of him occasionally. And he couldn't tell what he was thinking or feeling.

It was better that they part, that he find a haven for Trever so he could grow up safe and secure. Even loved, if that were possible.

Because Ferus would just keep burying them deeper into complications and danger. It wasn't fair to Trever. Today it had been a ten-foot duracrete slug. But what would tomorrow bring, and the day after that?

With those disquieting thoughts, Ferus felt himself slipping toward sleep. The soft breathing in the room told him that the others had succumbed, despite the hard, flat beds.

Suddenly he heard a noise. Ferus put his hand on his lightsaber, but soon saw it was Trever, crawling toward him quietly so as not to awaken the others.

He stopped by the head of the sleep couch, his eyes gleaming. "I know where to find Solace," he said.

Chapter Eleven

“It was when the slug started to pull me down—”

“Trever, I’m sorry I—”

“Enough with the guilt wallow, Feri-Wan—I’m trying to tell you something. I dropped an alpha charge and when it went off, the light showed me something. More than a ten-foot predator chewing on my ankle, I mean. There’s something down there.”

“Something?”

“Something more than a duracrete slug nest. I was thinking about it. There was a glint...like there was metal or something, or water. I’m not sure, but it was like there was...space. Like a room. Or something. It’s just that...remember when some of the rumors said *below* the crust?”

Ferus didn’t have to ask if Trever was sure. He trusted this boy’s perceptions.

“I’ll wake the others. Let’s go.”

It was now what many called the empty hours. Too late for even those who walked these dangerous areas at night, too early for those who rose before dawn. They kept close together as they walked.

Jude Watson

Trever led a yawning Keets and the others to the spot where the duracrete slug had tried to pull him through the crack. Ferus leaned over and shined a glowlight down into the space. He couldn't tell, but he thought Trever was right—there *was* something down there.

"I think I can fit," Ferus said. "Let me go down, and if I see anything, I'll call up."

Keets leaned against a column and yawned. "Take your time."

Ferus eased into the opening. There was a crumbling half-wall once he got below, he saw. It was deeply gouged with the tracks of a slug, but that gave him toeholds and handholds. To his surprise, Trever began to climb down after him.

"Stay up there," Ferus told him.

"No way. I found this place, I'm coming."

Ferus knew it would be a waste of breath to argue. He continued to climb down slowly. He jumped the last few meters. His boots hit solid ground. Trever jumped next to him a moment later. He held a glow rod over his head for illumination.

Ferus could see now that they were in a tunnel. Gigantic blocks of stone formed the walls and ceiling. The floor was deeply grooved and he could see the remnants of machinery buried in the tracks.

"That's what you saw glinting," he told Trever. "This must have been some kind of transportation system."

He shouted up to the others that the way was clear, and they began to climb down, one after the other.

Hume avoided a steaming yellow pool that released a rank odor. "Careful," he said. "Looks like some toxic waste down here."

"The system must have been primitive," Rhya said. "They used rails for transport."

Keets looked up. "There are still conduit lines in the ceiling. I wonder where they lead."

"It sure doesn't look like Solace," Hume said. "But the tunnel could lead us there."

Ferus heard a whisper above. That was his only warning as a black shape suddenly dropped from the ceiling into their path.

He didn't have time to grab his lightsaber hidden in his cloak. That's how fast the creature was.

He was a short being, with compact muscles, and wore a close-fitting helmet over his features. His waist was tightly cinched with a belt that held a variety of weapons. He didn't assume a threatening pose, however. He seemed casual as he watched them move closer, the Erased all holding their weapons and training them on him.

"You mentioned Solace," he said.

Ferus nodded, watching him warily. "We want to go there."

Gilly and Spence moved to the man's rear, and Keets, Oryon, Hume, and Rhya moved in even closer. The intruder didn't seem rattled in the least.

"I can take you," he said. "It will cost you."

"Why should we trust you?" Trever asked.

"Because your choices are limited here at the crust," he replied. "Either find it yourself, or use me."

"How do we know you can find it?" Keets asked.

"Because I've been there. I'm the only one who's been there and has come back."

They knew part of what he said was true. They had heard of those who'd gone to Solace, but they'd never heard of one who had returned.

"You've got to do better than that," Ferus said.

"What many don't know is that long ago, before Coruscant was a city-world, it had vast oceans," the intruder said. "The oceans were drained and pumped into caverns below the crust. That's where you'll find Solace."

The others exchanged glances. It sounded real to them. It made sense. That was why it was safe, why even the Empire would have a hard time finding it.

"What's your name?" Ferus asked.

Jude Watson

“Just call me Guide,” the intruder replied. “I left my name behind long ago. Like you, I have wiped out all traces of my past.”

Something is off here, Ferus thought. There was something odd about Guide. But then again, there was something odd about everyone down here.

Guide was right. They didn’t have much choice. It was the only lead they’d found since they started. Slowly, Ferus nodded.

“Take us there,” he said.

Chapter Twelve

Guide held up a glowlamp. “Best to keep close down here. Watch out for duracrete slugs. They’re especially aggressive.”

“I think we’ve already been introduced,” Trever muttered.

They kept to the middle of the tunnel as they walked. The walls dripped moisture. Occasionally they would pass a reeking toxic pool, glowing strangely in the darkness. They heard slithering noises, but no creatures appeared.

“The original cities of Coruscant were built on the crust, centuries ago,” Guide explained as they walked. “Much of the infrastructure is still underground. Most of the water and power tunnels have caved in, but there was a people-moving system that relied on some sort of primitive engine that connected to a track in the ground. These tunnels were built out of blocks of stone, and some are still intact. Later they were used to pump the oceans into the caverns. That’s where we’re going.”

They walked until they lost a sense of where they were and whether it was day or night above them. Ferus began to feel the lack of sleep and decent food. He pushed on.

Suddenly he heard the echo of lapping water. Guide stopped. “The water will grow deeper, but we’ll come to catwalks that will take us above it.”

Jude Watson

Soon they splashed through ankle-deep water. Up ahead he saw a crude stairway, and as Ferus followed the stairs with his eyes he saw that it connected to a series of platforms and more stairs. When Guide reached the stairs, he began to climb.

They climbed from platform to platform in the darkness. Ferus didn't know how deep the water was below them, but he could sense it. It was almost as though it still had tides, for it seemed to roar and recede as though it were constantly moving. He couldn't see it, he could only smell it and hear it now.

They heard a splash and looked over the side. Far below they could just make out a huge sea creature turning and slipping under the water again.

"Oh, yes," Guide said. "I should warn you—don't fall in."

The scaffolding suddenly opened out into a wide space that ran the width of the cavern. Planks of plastoid and wood were laid in a pattern. Structures had been built in separate circular encampments that connected to each other through metal walkways. It was like a small city.

In several of the structures Ferus saw lights come on. Whoever was inside was waking up.

Guide held up a small device, and an electronic noise pinged.

The denizens began to emerge from the structures. They were from many worlds, and all were armed with weapons. They slowly walked toward Guide.

The Erased found themselves pressed together in a small group as the settlers ringed around them.

Ferus began to feel uneasy. They were completely surrounded. Outnumbered.

A murmur began, some words passing from being to being. Guide held up a hand for silence.

"I brought them to you from above," he said.

Then he suddenly turned on his heel and merged with the crowd. "They are yours now."

The crowd began to move closer. Ferus, Trever, and the Erased backed up. But there was nowhere to go. Only the thin

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railing of the catwalk, and the long drop to the black ocean below.

Chapter Thirteen

It wasn't as though he didn't see this one coming from a kilometer off. Ferus had been poised for Guide to betray them. He would have been stupid not to expect it.

But it turned out he was foolish anyway. He had thought Guide might lead them into an ambush of some kind. He didn't expect the ambush to come from the members of Solace.

"Solace takes care of us," a woman said.

"Solace brings us what we need," someone called.

They were talking about Guide, Ferus realized. Solace wasn't a place—it was a person.

This was how they survived. They were scavengers. They spread the rumor of Solace above, and when Guide led a group back, they stole from them and used their credits or items of value to buy supplies. That was all painfully clear.

He felt the steady support of Keets, Oryon, and the others next to him. Trever's fingers appeared to be hooked into his belt, but Ferus knew he was fishing for a small explosive device. Maybe a smoke grenade.

The first line of settlers charged. Trever tossed the grenade, and the smoke rolled toward their attackers. At the same moment, Ferus drew his lightsaber, ready to deflect the blaster bolts he was sure would be streaking toward him.

He saw someone somersaulting through the smoke and air, and he held his lightsaber ready.

“Wait!”

The command came from Solace, who landed directly in front of the group. Everyone froze.

He walked forward. It was so quiet they could hear his boots click on the walkway.

He came close to Ferus, so close the glowing tip of the lightsaber was only millimeters from his chest.

“Jedi,” he said.

“Unfortunately for you, yes,” Ferus said.

Solace held up the glowlamp and examined Ferus’s features. “Not quite, I think.”

“Not quite what?” He wasn’t supposed to be having a conversation, he was supposed to be fighting, but he certainly didn’t mind the delay. It gave him more time to look for openings, avenues of escape, individuals who looked more competent than others, hidden weapons.

“You should have done that already, Not-Quite-a-Jedi,” Solace said. “You should have done it the first moment you arrived.”

“Are you giving me lessons?”

“Obviously, you need them. *Padawan*.”

Admittedly, Ferus’s instincts seemed to fail him at the worst times. But he suddenly understood what was off about their guide, and what he should have guessed all along.

“You’re *Fy-Tor*,” he said. “You’re a Jedi.”

“It’s about time.” Their “guide” slowly removed his helmet. Ferus recognized her now. *Fy-Tor* had pitched her voice deeper, moved differently, but he knew her.

She was gaunt, her cheeks hollowed. Her forehead marking was still there, but it was faint now, a faded tattoo. She had shaved her dark hair, but her blue eyes were still piercing.

She held up a hand.

“These are not for you,” she called to the settlers. “Disperse.”

Jude Watson

The crowd melted away, except for one man who remained a few steps behind her. His hands rested on his thick utility belt as though he was prepared to defend Fy-Tor at any moment.

She spoke to him without turning. “Donal. Can you get Ferus’s companions some food? They’ve been walking most of the night.”

“Of course.”

“No one will hurt you now,” she told them.

The Erased moved off, but Trever stayed stubbornly by Ferus’s side.

Fy-Tor raised an eyebrow. “Your apprentice?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Ferus said.

“Me either,” Trever said.

“We’ve been looking for you, Fy-Tor,” Ferus continued.

She held up a hand. “Don’t use that name. I’ve left it behind. I’m Solace now. You left the Jedi. Some sort of spat between Padawans, I heard.”

A *spat*? Ferus remembered the depths of his heartache, his guilt. “Hardly a spat.”

“So you say. Where did you find that lightsaber?”

“It was a gift from Garen Muln. The Jedi you left in the cave at Illum. The one you said you’d return for.”

“I tried.”

“So you say.”

They faced each other, close to adversaries now. Ferus didn’t know how it happened, but it had. He wouldn’t back down, although he could tell she was waiting. Either she still thought of him as a Padawan, or she was used to subservience from the settlers here. That was apparent in the way she gave orders, the way she expected them to move when she told them to move.

“I see we’re off to a good start,” she said. “Come on, Olin, let’s sit and you can tell me why you were looking for me. Step into my office.”

She sat astride a bench fashioned from what appeared to be a reclaimed speeder seat. Ferus sat, too. Trever crouched on the

floor. The expression on his face was wary; he didn't trust Solace yet. Neither did Ferus. The reunion he'd imagined taking place had been filled with relief and emotion, the core of understanding between Jedi. This wasn't even close. Solace was unreadable to him, and she seemed to have no wish to connect, Jedi to Jedi. Instead, so far she'd taken every opportunity to remind him that he wasn't one.

"I know of another Jedi who is alive, besides Garen," Ferus said. Although Obi-Wan had given him permission to tell other Jedi that he was alive, Ferus elected to wait with details until he had a better grasp of what Solace was like. He was still bothered by the fact that she had led them here and then turned her back indifferently to their fate. Whatever had happened to her had pushed her very far from the Jedi path.

"He is in exile, but Garen and I have established a secret base for any Jedi I can find. If we gather together again, we can become stronger."

Solace took this in. "You're serious? You're going to travel the galaxy, picking up stray Jedi—who may not even exist—and bring them to some camp?" She gave a bark of a laugh. "Count me out!"

"If we stay together, we'll be better able to fight when the time comes."

Solace shook her head. "The galaxy is controlled by the Sith. They've killed us all. Your plan is doomed, Ferus, and I want no part of it." She spread her arms. "I've got everything I need here."

"Beings who worship you," Ferus said. "Yes, I can see you have all the attention and service you could want."

She refused to be baited. "What's wrong with that?" she asked. "I've taken those who the Empire would have squashed like slugs and given them a safe place to live. What makes you think your plan is so much better than mine?"

Jude Watson

"We were destroyed," Ferus said quietly. "Betrayed. Even our younglings were slaughtered. What makes you so indifferent to that?"

Solace looked away, down through the grating to the ocean below. "Those were black days, and I don't choose to revisit them."

"Someday we can rise against them," Ferus said. "I believe that with my whole heart. And if I can help in any small way, protect even one Jedi, then I've pledged myself to that."

"May the Force be with you, then," Solace said. "But I'm not going anywhere. I've got a good deal here. I go on the occasional bounty-hunting job to finance this place. It's filled with beings I trust. The Empire doesn't know where to find me. It doesn't even know I'm alive."

"I'm afraid they do," Ferus said. "Trever and I broke into the Temple and overheard the head Inquisitor Malorum with Darth Vader. Vader knows you're alive, though he doesn't seem to care much. He's a Sith."

"There are always two," she said. "I didn't know who they were, but of course that makes sense."

"Malorum knows you're alive, too. He's planning to take back the sublevels of Coruscant, to go all the way down to the crust. That's why the Erased came down here—to see if they'd be safe. But Malorum also mentioned that he'd planted a spy near you."

"A spy? Here? I don't believe it."

"I don't know if it's true, I'm only telling you what I heard. He could have been trying to impress Vader." Ferus waited a beat. "But can you take that chance?"

Solace didn't answer.

Ferus leaned closer. "They've kept the lightsabers."

Solace looked up.

"Hundreds of them. Maybe more. From the Jedi they killed."

She clasped her hands and leaned forward, resting her forehead against them.

"They're lying in one of the storage rooms, gathering dust."

“What do you want from me?” she asked.

“I’m only here to find a Jedi...”

She took another breath, then lifted her head. “We should go back to the Temple.”

Ferus wasn’t expecting this. “What?”

“We’ll get inside and find out what they’re planning, for the settlers here and for the Erased.”

“I don’t think we can,” Ferus said. “The security will have been tightened.”

“We’ll steal the lightsabers back. If, as you say, there are more Jedi alive, we’ll have lightsabers for a whole army, if we need it. In any case, you can hide them. They shouldn’t lie with the Sith.” Her face hardened. “It’s a...desecration.”

“I agree, but—”

“And I’ll discover who the spy is, if there is one. Too much is at stake. We can leave immediately.”

“Solace, wouldn’t it make more sense to abandon this place and leave Coruscant altogether? Even if you don’t want to come to the asteroid, the galaxy is a big place. You can find somewhere to hide.”

“I’m tired of running. They’ve driven me here. Here is where I stay.”

“We just left the Temple a few days ago. I don’t think it’s possible to get in and get out now. Let alone navigate once we’re inside. They’ll be on full alert.”

“Double full *extra* red alert,” Trever put in.

“How did you get in?” Solace asked. Her face was intent. Ferus saw that she had already made up her mind.

“Through one of the towers, then down through the service tunnel to the main building.”

“The hard way.”

“I didn’t say it was easy.”

“Why didn’t you go through the supply turbolift shaft along the southeast wall?”

“There is no supply turbolift shaft on that side.”

Jude Watson

“Of course, you don’t know about it....It was built during the Clone Wars. We had so many more pilots, so much more gear to move back and forth to the hangar. The main shaft runs vertically up from the storage areas and then connects to a horizontal shaft that runs to the living quarters. Was that part of the Temple destroyed?”

“No, it’s been damaged, but much of it’s still intact.”

Solace reached into her belt and withdrew a small device. She sent a holographic map spinning into the air. It was a schematic of the Temple.

She pointed. “You see? The shaft is here and runs from the base of the building. You can connect to the horizontal shaft here. Then it connects to the main turbolift shaft in the spire.”

“The spire is damaged.”

“I know, but it doesn’t matter. They probably don’t use this turbolift. There’s no reason to—it mainly served the living quarters and the hangar. Where is Malorum?”

“In what used to be Yoda’s quarters.”

“Then his office is here. It’s only a short distance from the shaft.”

Ferus felt his blood quicken. Was it possible? But he shook his head. “Even if we could use the new turbolift, how will we get in?”

“I have a way. Unlike most of the buildings at that level, the Temple was built by sinking pillars into the crust. I’ve found those pillars. We can follow them up to the base. Then we can break right into the new turbolift shaft.”

“Through the floor?”

“We’d have to blast it,” Trevor said. “They’d be on us in seconds.”

“No, I have a different way.” Solace sprang to her feet. “Let me show you.”

They stood in front of a small, two-person craft. It was the oddest thing Ferus had ever seen. It looked like an ARC-170 with a cut-off nose. Devices he didn't recognize were set into the hull.

"I can see it's a vehicle, but I can't figure it out. Looks like it could be an interceptor, but..."

Solace grinned. "I started with a shell and built it myself. It's a hybrid—a fighter with a mole-miner capability. I bought the mole miner and took out the plasma jets. They're mounted below. I had to remove the shields and the laser cannons, so I lost some defensive and offensive capability, but it's still fast. The ship can burrow through solid rock. It can get through the base of the Temple, I promise you."

"But why did you build it in the first place?" Ferus asked.

"I live under the crust. I need an exit strategy. So, what do you say? I'm going. Are you in or out?"

Ferus looked at Trever. It might be foolhardy, but it might be brilliant. They could steal back the lightsabers. They could raid Malorum's files. He could find out what Malorum had learned about Polis Massa. He could find a way to stop him, follow through on his promise to Obi-Wan. This could be his only chance.

"I'm in," he said.

Chapter Fourteen

“You’re not going without me,” Trever said.

Ferus’s expression clearly said *not this again*. But Trever didn’t care. He wasn’t going to be left behind. He’d been left behind before. By his mother, by his father, by his brother. Each time, they’d said *It’s too dangerous. You’ll be safe here*.

Each time they said *I’ll be back*.

“It’s a two-person ship,” Ferus said. “There’s no room. I’ll be back—”

“No! Don’t say that,” Trever warned. “Just...don’t. I can help. I’ve been to the Temple. I’m small—I can get into tight spaces. And you’ll need some blasting expertise.”

Solace looked at him doubtfully, and he bristled.

“I’ve got half- and quarter-alpha charges, and I’ve made my own mini-blasts,” Trever said. “No noise, no smoke, just sweet entry anywhere you want to go.”

Solace looked at Ferus.

“Trever has had an interesting history,” he said.

“If we take the tool kit out, you can fit behind the seat.” Solace looked at Ferus. “The kid can handle himself. You could, too, at his age. So relax.”

“Ferus doesn’t know the meaning of the word,” Trever said.

Solace and Trever laughed, and some of the pressure Ferus felt inside eased. It was good to be laughed at again. It felt like friendship.

Hume, Rhya, Keets, Oryon, Curran, Gilly, and Spence were sitting at a table fashioned out of a slab of permacrete balanced on some old protocol droid legs. Ferus approached them and sat.

“I’m taking off. Solace promises you’ll be safe here. Her assistant Donal will look out for you. I don’t think I’ll be long. Solace and Trever and I have decided to break into the Temple again. This time, I’m going to get a look at the files and see exactly what Malorum is planning. Unless we go, this place won’t be safe.”

“We’ll come with you,” Hume said.

“No. First of all, there’s no room. And second—well, you came with me to find Solace, and you found it. This is my battle.”

Ferus stood. He looked at each of them. They’d been together only a short time, but he felt tied to them, tied to their struggle to stay alive.

It was Curran who spoke up, using the words of the Svivreni. On their world, it was considered bad luck to say good-bye.

“The journey begins,” Curran said softly. “So go.”

When Ferus returned, he found that Solace had already done the preflight check. Trever had squeezed into the space behind the seat. Ferus slid into the passenger seat directly behind Solace. The craft was so small that they easily navigated through the cavern and zoomed into the underground tunnel.

“I’ve explored all through the tunnels down here,” Solace said. “There are more than I told you about. It took me months to get all the parts for this craft and build it.”

She piloted through the tunnel, flipping the craft sideways when she had to. Then she zoomed up through a huge crack in

Jude Watson

the ceiling and they entered the main lane of the old city on the crust. They buzzed through the empty place.

“The columns for the Temple were sunk near the tech warehouses,” Solace continued. “They were hard to find because the trash heaps were built around them about a century later.”

After maneuvering for nearly an hour, the craft dipped down into a vast smoking heap of garbage piled hundreds of meters high. Solace navigated the space, veering around the piles. At last they saw a thick column ahead, and then another, and another. “There are the supports. Hang on.”

Now they were going straight up, hugging the column as it rose through the sublevels of Coruscant. Trever fought against dizziness. He was looking straight up through the cockpit canopy. Level after level rushed at him, floors, spires, walls, walkways, lights, beings, cloud cars, air taxis, landing platforms.

It had taken them so long to get down to the crust, and now it was all receding behind him so quickly.

The buildings grew more thickly around them. Lights came on. Dawn was breaking above them. Speeders and air taxis streaked past them. And they were still below the surface.

He knew they were close when Solace pulled back on the speed. “Our best chance is to do this quickly,” she said. “In and out.”

Above them Trever saw the base of the massive Temple building. Even down here he could see evidence of damage, blackened stone and missing chunks, as though the building had been hacked away at.

Slowly they cruised around the base, searching for the place Solace was looking for. She positioned the ship’s nose against the wall. A whirring noise began, and the plasma jets began to slice through the base.

Fine dust coated the windshield, but Solace had thought of that, too. A rotating device cleared the windshield every few seconds, leaving them complete visibility.

The plasma jets cleared a hole just big enough for the ship to get through. They flew inside and found themselves directly in the turbolift shaft.

“It worked!” Solace exclaimed.

“I wish you didn’t sound quite so surprised,” Ferus remarked.

“Malorum’s office first. Then back down to storage if we haven’t been discovered.”

The craft ascended the shaft, then turned into a horizontal turbolift corridor. They could see the turbolift itself now, unused, at the end of the shaft. Beyond it they could see that the corridor had been blasted, some of it caving in. The turbolift was partially destroyed.

Solace gently brought the craft to rest on the shaft flooring. The cockpit canopy whirled back, and one by one they climbed out.

“This lift door opens out into the service hallway,” Solace said in a low tone.

She and Ferus stood by the door. Trever watched them. Something was passing between them, and he supposed it was the Force. He couldn’t feel it, but he was starting to recognize its presence, just by the quietness that surrounded Ferus when he accessed it. Then, without a word being spoken, Ferus stepped forward and cut a hole in the door with his lightsaber. They stepped through.

The hallway was empty. Trever followed behind as the two Jedi moved quickly and silently. He almost tripped on a conductor wire, but caught himself just in time. He broke out into a sweat at the thought of the noise he would have made if he fell.

In and out, Solace had said. Attract no attention.

This hallway had been used recently. He saw evidence of scrape marks along the power vents, as though they’d been pried off. Was the Empire looking for something hidden in the Temple? They’d heard the same rumors he had about treasure being kept here. Of course, according to Ferus, Palpatine had

Jude Watson

started the rumors, but that didn't mean Imperial officers knew that.

Why had there been conductor wire on the floor?

Ferus accessed a doorway to the main hallway. Trever could see the door to Malorum's office. It was open. They could hear the sound of others in the building, but the hallway was clear.

Quickly they crossed the hallway and went into the office. Ferus hurried to the desk.

"The holofiles—they're gone. So are the datapads."

Solace looked around. "It's been cleaned out."

"I guess Vader wanted Malorum back under his nose."

"I won't learn the name of the spy now," Solace said in disgust.

Ferus frowned. He went to the window and looked out, keeping out of sight. "Where are the troops?" he wondered. "This place was crawling with them when we were here last. You'd think there would be even more."

"Something's wrong," Solace said. "I feel it."

"I feel it, too."

"Let's find the lightsabers and get out of here," Solace suggested.

The glowlights dimmed for a moment, then resumed. It was just a glitch, Trever told himself. But something was making him uneasy. Something that had nothing to do with the Force, and everything to do with the Empire.

The wire he'd almost tripped on. The scratch marks on the power vents.

"Wait," he said.

He whipped out his servodriver and hurried to the power panel. He unscrewed it from the wall and looked inside.

"Trever, what is it?"

"Power leakage," he said. "Something is sucking the power from the core generator."

"Why?"

"I can think of only one reason," Trever said. "A version of a sleeper bomb. They've tapped different power stations, all at once, to fuel it. They're draining the power to build the explosion. They've gone into different power vents. I'd say they wanted to tap enough power to blow the entire Temple."

"It's Malorum," Ferus said. "That's why he cleared out his office. Vader told him to do it, so he's doing it. Even though Vader wasn't serious. It's Malorum's way to disgrace Vader in the eyes of the Emperor. He can claim that Vader gave the order."

"Do you have any idea when it could blow?" Ferus asked Trever.

"It's just a guess," Trever said. "But if that glitch means what I think it means, we could have just made the shift to reserve power."

"Which means what?" Ferus asked.

"Which means soon. Minutes." Trever swallowed. "We don't have time to leave the way we came."

"We could go out the front entrance," Solace said. "Take our chances. Leave the Temple and let it be destroyed."

"I can't," Ferus said.

Solace nodded. "Neither can I."

Chapter Fifteen

They raced through the main hallways. There was no time for subterfuge.

Malorum and his officers had withdrawn most of the stormtroopers, but they had left attack droids to continue the patrols, to prevent interference from intruders. Ferus bounded toward the first group as it wheeled to engage them. His lightsaber moved rapidly as he mowed through them from one side while Solace took the other. She was all movement and no wasted motion, her lightsaber a blur. She was faster and better than Ferus and together they destroyed the droids in only seconds. They met in the middle and raced through the gap they'd created, smoke rising around them. Trever kicked through the hot metal and followed.

They knew where the central core generator was. The only chance they had was to shut it down before the bomb was fully armed.

Not trusting the turbolifts, they swung downstairs, leaping down and letting Trever catch up when they had to pause to dispatch more attack droids. They made it to the power source, a white room where the mighty sublight generator hummed. The reserve power light was blinking.

“Here’s the bomb,” Trever said, hurrying over to it. “They didn’t bother to hide it. You’ve got to shut down the main generator. But do it gradually, or it could trigger the bomb.”

“Thanks for telling me.” Ferus turned his attention to the power-core controls. He knew how to do this. He had made it a personal course of study to find out how the infrastructure of the Temple worked. Quickly, he accessed the power computer bank. He went through the necessary series of steps to shut down the system. He went slowly, powering each subsystem down from green to yellow to red.

The lights flickered and failed. They heard the gentle sigh as the air system shut down.

“What now?” Solace asked.

“We wait,” Trever said. “And hope we don’t blow.”

Solace held up her lightsaber, which gave a soft blue glow. Trever got out his glow rod. The seconds ticked by. He looked at the power indicator on the bomb. Slowly, the indicator began to move.

“It’s draining,” he said. “It won’t arm.” He looked up at Ferus. “You can kill it now. It’s dead.”

Ferus swiped a clean strike through the bomb. The device split into two neat halves.

“How long before they figure it out?” Solace asked.

“Soon,” Ferus said. “I would imagine that Malorum is nearby. He’ll want to see it blow.”

“We stopped him this time. But all he has to do is set another one,” Trever said.

“I think Vader will find out and stop it,” Ferus said. “That’s my guess, anyway. Word will get back. If the Emperor wanted the Temple completely destroyed he would have ordered it done. He wants it to remain. It’s a symbol to the galaxy—the wreck of the Jedi Order. But to us, it’s a symbol of what we can be again.”

“I don’t know if it’s a symbol of anything anymore,” Solace said. “I just know it was my home, and I don’t want them to blow it up.”

Jude Watson

They walked out of the central power control center and started down the hall again. Suddenly they heard the noise of stormtroopers clacking down the hallway. Ahead, from this vantage point, they could see the entrance to the Temple. As they looked, the doors flew open and stormtroopers poured in. Malorum was at the head. They could hear his voice boom, bouncing off the high stone walls.

“Find them!” he screamed.

A sea of white flooded the main hallway. They turned and ran. They could not meet this display of force. Overhead, seeker droids began to fan out, searching for them.

They ran back the way they had come. They had to get to Solace’s ship. It was their only hope for escape.

Pursued by a seeker droid, they raced down the hallway. Ferus leaped and twisted, slicing it in two.

They could hear the stormtroopers behind them, running now. “They must have picked us up on surveillance,” Solace said.

They had seconds. Ferus hurried Trevor through the hole to the turbolift shaft. Solace followed. Blaster fire peppered the lift door as Ferus stood, deflecting it. When he was sure Solace and Trevor were inside the craft, he turned to leap inside the hole.

At that moment, at least fifty more stormtroopers appeared, some of them on AT-RT walkers. If Solace waited for him, they would all be captured or dead.

He looked at Trevor, whose eyes were wide, pleading. “I’ll be back!” he yelled.

“I told you not to say that!”

Ferus deactivated his lightsaber and lifted his hand. Solace saw his intention and leaped up momentarily to catch it as it flipped through the air. He would allow himself to be captured, but not his lightsaber.

“Now go!”

Solace hesitated. He saw how close she was to joining him. He couldn’t let her.

“You’ve got to get him out of here!” Ferus shouted.

STAR WARS: Underworld

As Trever screamed and hammered her back with his fists, Solace pushed the controls, and the ship took off.

It had all taken less than a moment. He knew Malorum would want to take him alive. Ferus turned toward the onslaught, defenseless now, and alone.

Chapter Sixteen

He sat in a prison. Somewhere. He hadn't been taken off Coruscant, he knew that much. He had a bruise on the back of his head where they'd hit him with a stun baton. His legs still tingled from the blow to the back of his knees.

It was only the beginning, he knew.

He had been in an Imperial prison before and had escaped before they tortured him. He didn't think he would be that lucky twice. The last time, Malorum had been the head officer.

One thing you really didn't want, Ferus reflected through his crashing headache, was an Imperial Inquisitor with a grudge.

He lifted his head when the doors swished open. Malorum walked in. Ferus could feel his enjoyment of the situation. Ferus decided then and there that no matter what they did to him, he was going to give Malorum a hard time.

"We've got to stop meeting like this, Malorum," he said.

"Very amusing."

"No, I mean it. We really do. You've just got to get out of prison. See the galaxy. Have some fun—"

"I'm having fun right now. I'm enjoying this immensely."

"Wow, me too. At last, we're bonding."

"So let's talk."

Ferus nodded and stretched out his legs. The pain nearly made him wince, but not quite.

Be a Jedi, Ferus. Be the Jedi you never were, for star's sake. Accept your fear and find your center.

"Let's talk about the Jedi. I underestimated you, Ferus. I thought you left them and never looked back. But you've been doing nothing else but trying to save them. Who is the Jedi you were with at the Temple?"

"I was with thousands of Jedi at the Temple. And it was so long ago..."

"You know what I mean. Today. When you broke into Imperial property. What is the name of the Jedi you were with on Bellassa?"

Ferus pretended to frown. "Funny, he never mentioned it."

"You never caught his name?"

"He never dropped it."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Now there's the difference between you and me. I find it absolutely believable. If all your friends had been wiped out, do you think you'd be going around telling people your name? I don't think so. You'd keep it to yourself, I think."

"If I was a coward."

"Ah, in my opinion, cowardice is underrated. It keeps you alive."

"Is being alive so important to you? That's a pity."

"Are you feeling sorry for me now? I didn't know you cared."

Malorum laughed. "You think I haven't seen this before? Bravado in the face of certain death? You'd be surprised how often those about to die put on a show. You aren't unique."

"I don't care much about being unique. Remember, I was raised a Jedi."

"Yes, you're all the same, I suppose. Hypocrites. Hungry for power. You were about to take over the Senate, you tried to assassinate Emperor Palpatine...all while wearing those Jedi cloaks of humility. It was a good scam, but it's over."

Jude Watson

Ferus waved a hand in the air. "I love the rhythm of the party line. Just say the lies loud enough and long enough and put a drumbeat behind it, and the next thing you know, everyone is singing the same tune."

"The truth is that—"

"The truth," Ferus said quietly, "is that the Republic is now an Empire, and power is consolidated in the hands of one man. He will do anything to keep it, anything to make it grow, and you are his lackey."

"This isn't a debate. As you say, it's been fun, Ferus Olin. But if you aren't going to cooperate—"

"You have ways to make me talk? Let me think. Torture is still against the bylaws of the Senate. Last time I heard."

"Then you're wrong. The Senate approved the Emperor's call for more freedom in how he handles enemies. In times such as these, extreme measures can be called for."

And so the Senators continued to give the Emperor anything he wanted, Ferus thought. He was changing the galaxy, breaking the covenants the Senate was founded on, and they were voting yes to it. The Sith was clever. Always he acted with the "approval" of a Senate that could not say no.

"I'm sending you to a prison world where no one goes. And if you don't reveal the name of the Jedi you know are alive, you will be executed for crimes against the Empire. Do you think anyone will care? They've already forgotten your name on Bellassa."

"Well, I never call, I never write..."

"I'm talking to a dead man," Malorum said. "And it's time for my lunch."

With the same indifference he'd shown throughout the interview, Malorum turned and walked out.

Chapter Seventeen

As soon as Solace had landed the ship in its parking place tucked under the cavern wall, Trever vaulted forward and slapped his hand on the cockpit canopy release. Even as it opened, he clambered out over her.

“You left him! You just left him!” he shouted. “It’s your fault they caught him!”

“He gave himself up, Trever,” Solace said, jumping off the ship and landing lightly next to him. “There was nothing I could do. He left me no other choice.”

“Jedi don’t leave Jedi!” Trever felt his fury take him over. “But you do, don’t you? Twice that I know about. You don’t know anything about loyalty!”

Solace stood, impassive. He couldn’t tell if she was angry. She didn’t seem angry. He wanted her to be angry, he wanted to fight.

“My choices are not your business,” she said.

“*Ferus* is my business,” Trever said. “He’s my friend.”

“We’ll find him,” Solace said. “Wherever they take him, we’ll find him.”

Trever heard her words as though from a distance. They didn’t make sense for a moment. “What?”

Jude Watson

“I said we’ll find him. I won’t stop until we do. This isn’t over. But first we need supplies and information. I have to—”

Solace suddenly stopped. She appeared to be listening, but there was nothing to hear.

“Solace, what—”

She turned and ran, silently and swiftly, along the catwalks. She made a leap so impossible that Trever knew it was Force-assisted, vaulting over the catwalks to gain time.

He ran after her, his feet pounding up the stairs. He was halfway to the settlement when he heard it. Blaster fire. Screams.

A bloodied Keets appeared above. Suddenly he was hit from behind and tumbled off the catwalk. He landed at Trever’s feet, his body twisted, blood pooling from a wound.

Solace’s assistant, Donal, ran toward the edge of the catwalk.

“We’re under attack!” he screamed.

Solace was right, Trever thought. *This isn’t nearly over.*

He readied himself for the fight....

STAR WARS

LAST OF THE JEDI

DEATH ON NABOO

BY JUDE WATSON

Disney

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Chapter One

Meetings with the Emperor were always unnerving. Malorum just hoped this one wouldn't be fatal.

Malorum paused outside the airlock to the Emperor's private office, high on the top floors of the Senate office building. He had undergone the weapons scan. As the Emperor's most loyal subject, it was a process he found insulting, but he had to submit to it. Once he went through those doors, he'd be whisked in to see Palpatine by Sly Moore, that moonfaced nonentity who managed to slither herself into a position of power. *Probably by blackmailing the right beings*, Malorum thought, because he could find no other reason for her prominence. The usual jealous surge passed through him as he wondered, once again, why others got what he deserved.

He took a deep breath.

He needed a moment. He needed to remind himself how well things were going. No matter what lies Darth Vader had told the Emperor, Malorum knew the truth. He was the best Inquisitor the Emperor had.

Ready now, Malorum strode through the door. He went through his usual battle of wills with Sly Moore. She glided her way toward him and he kept going to the door to Palpatine's inner office, so that it wouldn't appear that he was waiting for

Jude Watson

her to access it. He just walked right through—slightly ahead of her, of course.

He timed it perfectly.

His small victory died a quick death as Palpatine swiveled in his chair to face him. Right away, Malorum knew this was not going to be a good meeting.

He gathered his courage and walked forward into the grand red room. He loved this office. The bold red color, the bronzium statues of the Four Sages of Dwartii, the access to datafeeds that spewed out information constantly. You felt you were truly in the center of the galaxy, controlling everyone in it.

Palpatine stared at him with his pale eyes. Malorum wished, not for the first time, that Palpatine hadn't been so hideously scarred by the battle with Mace Windu. It was positively unnerving; you'd think that with all that access to the Force he could find a way to make himself look more attractive. When Malorum became Emperor (a thought Malorum only allowed to cross his mind occasionally; there was so much farther to go) he would make sure to get plenty of rest and a rejuvenating trip to the excellent surgeons of Belazura once a year.

"Why did you give an order to blow up the Jedi Temple?" The Emperor shot the question at him. So much for preliminaries.

"I was following through on an order by Lord Vader—"

"He said that you would claim that."

"But it's true." Technically. Vader had made the suggestion only to see how Malorum would react. Malorum had fallen right into his trap by protesting that he had files that would be destroyed. The next thing he knew, Vader was taking him to task for having secret files that weren't registered with the Inquisitors' main databank.

He had taken a gamble, attempting to blow up the Temple. He had actually enjoyed having his office there. To walk into that grand hallway was a thrill. It was visible evidence of the greatness vanquished by the power of the Empire. Proof that a Force

STAR WARS: Death on Naboo

connection wasn't enough; it was how you used the dark side of the Force that mattered.

He knew Emperor Palpatine was frustrated with the apprentice he'd ended up with. He had expected someone with awesome power, but instead he got a rebuilt body in a breath mask. Darth Vader was powerful, but compared to what he could have been...well, who wouldn't be disappointed?

What Palpatine needed was a new apprentice. Because of his Force-sensitivity, Malorum had been plucked out of obscurity. Palpatine had revealed that he was a Sith. He had explained what the Force was in detail and how, with training, Malorum could use it for great things.

Malorum had expected greater access because of that: dinners with the Emperor and his most trusted aides; confidences meant for him alone; invitations to Palpatine's private apartments in the exclusive 500 Republica residential tower. Instead, he himself was on the waiting list for an apartment, lined up with Senators and bureaucrats. It was infuriating!

Now he was scrambling to please Palpatine and being undercut by Darth Vader at every turn.

"You exceeded your authority," Palpatine went on. His gaze was as chilling as a monthlong vacation on Hoth.

Malorum looked to the bronzium statues for inspiration, then turned his gaze back quickly. He had learned to stand his ground with the Emperor. Never argue. Present your case, then change the subject if you can.

"The attack on Solace and her followers is proceeding," he said. He unfurled his best piece of information, the one he was holding in reserve like an expert sabacc player. "Everyone has been killed and the community destroyed. She is confirmed dead."

"And you saw this with your own eyes?"

"I received a report from the commander." Did the Emperor really expect him to travel all the way down to the Core, to the ancient ocean caverns?

Jude Watson

“A Jedi is not dead until you see the body. Inform me when this is so.”

He had been dismissed. Malorum made an instant decision to withhold the information that he had Ferus Olin in custody. He might need that at a future date. And he had plans for the former Jedi apprentice, plans that he was just beginning to form. Ferus was the only being he could find who could connect him to the old Darth Vader.

Malorum bowed and walked out, ignoring Sly Moore and proceeding directly to the express turbolift. As he descended into the Senate office building, he thought about what he knew...and what he still had to discover.

His most important piece of information was this: He knew that Darth Vader was Anakin Skywalker.

The Emperor didn't know that Malorum knew this. Before the tapes of the Temple attack had been erased, he had seen them. He hadn't been an Inquisitor then, just one of the trusted Imperial intelligence officers sent to the Temple after Order 66. He had seen what Anakin Skywalker had done. And he had seen the Jedi knight kneel down before the Emperor, who had called him “Darth Vader.”

Since then he'd made it his business to discover everything he could about Skywalker. Bribes and surveillance and digging back into what had happened months before.

He knew that Anakin Skywalker had been a Jedi apprentice at the same time as Ferus Olin. He knew that Skywalker was the father of Senator Amidala's child, the child that had never been born. He suspected that the Senator had been treated on Polis Massa, but so far the disappearance of records had stopped the trail cold.

Secrets contained surprises. Once you knew a person's secrets, you had the key to destroying him.

Ferus Olin would be the key.

Chapter Two

It wasn't so bad, for a prison. Ferus had seen worse.

He stirred on the hard duracrete where he slept...and found himself face-to-face with the biggest meer rat he'd ever seen, chewing on one of his boots.

Well. Maybe not.

He tossed his other boot at the rodent and it scurried away. He figured he might as well look the facts in the face. He'd landed in the worst prison in the galaxy, and unless someone near and dear to him—or even someone who didn't like him particularly much, like Jedi Master Solace—rescued him, he was stuck here, worked to death until he was executed.

It was the usual cunning plan of the Empire. Condemn the beings who displease you—don't bother with a trial, because your suspicions are enough—then stick them all in a stinking hole on a planet where nobody goes, force them to labor, don't even let them speak to one another, and then, when they're too weak to do you a bit of good, execute them. What a swell system to be stuck in. Trust him to find it.

So maybe breaking into the Temple wasn't the *best* idea he ever had. And then he had to go and do it twice. No wonder Malorum had been testy.

Jude Watson

He had been looking for Jedi. Rumors had swirled that they were kept in a prison there. But the rumors were designed as a trick to lure any Jedi into a rescue attempt. Ferus had fallen right into the trap.

The need to find every last Jedi was leading him to places he'd never expected to go. Obi-Wan Kenobi, now in exile on Tatooine, had refused to become part of his plans for a secret base. Ferus didn't let that stop him. He knew there must be Jedi out there who had survived the purge. They needed a sanctuary. He had stumbled on a remote asteroid that constantly traveled the galaxy within a moving atmospheric storm. He had two trusted aides setting up a camp there, Raina and Toma, as well as the recovering Jedi Knight Garen Muln.

When he'd found Jedi Master Solace, he'd discovered that she'd set up a community next to the forgotten underground oceans of Coruscant. The raggedy society had built its homes on a series of catwalks over the sea in a vast cavern. When he'd told Solace what he'd seen in the Temple—a room full of lightsabers captured from murdered Jedi—she had been stricken by sadness and anger. Then he'd told her that he'd overheard that there was a spy in her camp, and she'd become enraged.

She'd talked him into breaking in again. He would need lightsabers, she argued, for the Jedi he was sure were out there. And she needed to discover the identity of her spy.

So they'd broken into the base of the Temple, thanks to Solace's odd ship with a mole miner aboard. But they'd run into too many stormtroopers and more trouble than they could handle. Now here he was, in prison, with an execution order just waiting to be carried out.

He was given a number when he arrived: 987323. He was told not to talk to any other prisoner and not to ask the guards for anything because he wouldn't get it anyway. "Not even for seconds on dessert?" he'd asked, and in response had received a force pike in the stomach. That had taken hours to recover from. He had to remember to keep his mouth shut.

STAR WARS: Death on Naboo

The situation was hopeless, he supposed, but he had been trained as a Jedi, and so he resisted feeling hopeless. There was always a way. Or, as Yoda would say, *a way there always is*.

He wondered about Trever, the thirteen-year-old who had pretty much adopted him as a guardian. He had been along to break into the Temple—both times. He didn't seem to want to leave Ferus's side. Would Solace take care of him? Not that Trever would let anyone take care of him, exactly. And not that Solace had the warmest of characters. Still, he hoped Trever was all right. He was a street thief and an explosives expert and a pain in the neck, but he was still a boy.

The rat returned, and Ferus winged his boot at it again. It retreated, baring its teeth in a rather human way that gave Ferus a chill. He hoped he wouldn't see those teeth sunk into his ankle later. Maybe sleeping wasn't such a good idea.

"Do you mind, chum?" The voice of his cellmate rose out of the corner. Ferus had been thrown into the cell in the pitch-black and hadn't met him yet. He was just a shape in the corner. "I'm trying to sleep."

"There's a meer rat—"

"You don't say. What a shock." Ferus could only see a gleam of pale skin across the space. "They like to eat boots. Use them as a pillow."

"Use my boots as a pillow?"

"What, duracrete is such a nice cushion? Keep a rock in your hand and crush its skull when you get a chance. Leave the body. The others will get the message. Better do it or else you'll find one chewing on your face in the middle of the night."

"I don't have a rock."

Ferus could hear his cellmate's sigh. "Why do I always get stuck with the new guy? Heads up." A good-sized rock suddenly loomed out of the darkness. Ferus caught it, but if he hadn't had quick reflexes it would have bashed in the side of his head.

"Thanks. So where am I?"

Jude Watson

“Dontamo Prison. But don’t worry, you won’t be here long. One day soon you’ll be dead.”

“I got that impression. Has anyone ever escaped?”

“Death is your escape, my friend.” Ferus heard his cellmate turn over to face him. Now he could see the gleam of his eyes. “All right, I can see that I won’t get any sleep until I give you the lowdown. Whatever you do, don’t get sick. No one who goes to the infirmary ever comes back. Second, don’t talk to anyone during the day. And don’t talk to me unless you have to. I have a whole fantasy world going on in my head, and I don’t like to be interrupted. I’m on a picnic with my wife, and the sun is shining, and I’m about to eat one of her sweetberry tarts.”

“You’re married?”

“Never ask a personal question,” the prisoner continued. “Never fall down. Never tell anyone you’re innocent. Nobody had a trial here, so we’ve got the innocent and the guilty and it makes no difference. Nothing matters here except putting in your time until you get to die. Everybody fights over rations. That’s the currency here. Eat fast. And one last thing, the most important thing—don’t cross Prisoner 677780. He runs the gang here. We just call him 67. Don’t even catch his eye. You’ll be sorry if you do.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

“My advice is, think of the best day of your life and replay it in your head. Now leave me alone.”

Ferus felt his cellmate turn away. He lay on his back, staring at the ceiling, and clutching the rock. Was this all he had left? Hanging on to a memory, replaying it until death came for him?

Best day of his life...

He and Roan, on a hiking trip on the neighboring world of Tati, deep in the forest, coming upon a waterfall that slid into a deep pool of green. They had been so hot, and they’d dived in, straight to the bottom. The water was so cold they came up shivering and laughing...

STAR WARS: Death on Naboo

He heard the rat scuttling forward and he brought his hand down, hard, with the rock in his fist. The rat lay still.

Those Jedi reaction skills sure could come in handy....

Chapter Three

Trever flattened himself on the metal walkway. He heard the ping of blaster fire and the cries from people being hit. He smelled smoke from the detonators and the burning dwellings. He heard the sound of bodies falling.

He was hiding, his usual position in a battle. But this time it was different. This time he couldn't move. His fingers shook as he curled them around the grating underneath him. His hiding place was good, behind one of the Imperial troops' own speeders. There was a guard, but he hadn't seen Trever. For a brief moment Trever had thought of stealing the speeder, but he knew he'd be blasted to bits in seconds.

When he and Solace had returned from the disaster at the Jedi Temple, Solace had heard the battle before he did. She had leaped off the ship and straight into the thick of it.

He had seen battles before, but none like this. He had run from Imperial officers, he had broken into buildings, he had taken the risks needed to maintain his own black-market operation, but this was different. This was terrifying. The eerily white stormtroopers were bent on annihilating everything in their path.

He had caught glimpses of Solace, fighting furiously to save her followers. He'd seen her moving, diving, never losing her

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balance or her grace despite the ferocity of her attack. Her lightsaber was a beacon of light, glowing green through the smoke.

She would lose. She would hold out as long as she could, but she could not win. There were simply too many of them. Almost everybody was dead now. Slaughtered without thought, without pause.

Rhya Taloon was dead. He saw her die. She'd been a Senator once, until they targeted her for prison or worse and she had joined the Erased, the group who'd destroyed their former identities and hid in the lower levels of Coruscant. She had fashioned a new, fierce look for herself, twisting her silver hair into horns and wearing holsters across her body. She'd learned how to shoot a blaster, but she'd never been very good at it.

He and Ferus had traveled down here with other members of the Erased, but now they were dead, too. It must be so, because all he could see were bodies. Among them lay Hume, who'd once been a pilot in the Republic Army. Gilly and Spence, the brothers who hardly spoke. Oryon, the fierce Bothan who'd been a spy for the Republic during the Clone Wars. Curran Caladian, the young Svivreni who'd once been a Senatorial aide, had leaped to defend the houses in the central catwalk. Trever had seen the stormtroopers send flame grenades into the homes and had turned away.

And Keets Freely, the journalist. Trever had seen his body, bloodied and battered, as he and Solace had run up to investigate. He couldn't believe it, couldn't believe that the mocking, indestructible Keets could fall. But fall he did, from a platform above, landing at Trever's feet. That had been the beginning of Trever's true terror.

In the short time he'd been traveling with them, they'd all become his friends. And now he didn't know what to do or where to go, because he was sure that this was the day he would die.

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A new voice rose in his mind, not a voice of fear but impatience.

Well, if you're going to die, show some guts, will you?

He slowly, painstakingly, raised his head, ready for it to be blown off at any moment.

The battle had moved to an upper level of the catwalks and landings that twisted so crazily below the cavern walls. But there wasn't much battle left. He saw a few holdouts, but they were surrounded and soon would be dead. He wrenched his gaze away. He couldn't watch anymore, couldn't bear it anymore....

Suddenly a streak through the smoke made him raise his head. Solace had made an incredible leap, jumping down from the topmost catwalk to the one just above Trever's head. Stormtroopers were pouring down the ramps after her. In another few moments they would corner her.

And he was here, hiding like a coward.

He had to help her, and do it fast. But how?

Stop hiding, Trever. That would be a start.

He snaked behind the other speeders and was able to get a better look above.

The stormtrooper guarding the speeders turned away from the noise of battle to take a communication—he could see him speaking into his helmet, straining to hear over the noise—and Trever leaped closer to the stairs that led to the next level. He landed behind a smoking heap of twisted metal that had once been a house. He slammed into a body and nearly levitated out of the space in terror until a strong hand clamped on his leg.

“Don't move.”

It was Oryon, the Bothan. His face was blackened with smoke, his long mane a tangled mass. His tunic was torn and a long scratch ran down his upper arm. His eyes were reddened from the acrid smoke. He was the fiercest thing Trever had ever seen.

“Solace is—” Trever panted.

“I know. Do you have any charges left?”

Trever nodded, ashamed. He had been too afraid to set off many of his charges. He had hidden instead.

"I've got some grenades," Oryon said. "It might be enough."

"What are we going to do?"

"Blow the whole platform."

"But she'll fall."

"She's a Jedi. She'll survive. But they won't."

"Uh, and what about..." Trever gulped. "Us?"

"We'll do it from below, then get back to this platform."

Trever glanced down through the grate to the black sea below. "*Below?*" he squeaked.

"Are you ready?"

Ready? I'm ready to run the other way.

No—keep it together.

Trever nodded.

"Follow me."

Oryon took two strides and suddenly flipped himself over the catwalk railing. Trever moved cautiously forward and hung over the railing in astonishment. He saw that there were handholds and footholds below the grating, just random pieces of metal that you could hang on to in order to scabble your way across, moving underneath the grating like a crab. Far, far below he saw the moving black sea.

There was nothing else to do but go over. A small part of him was pleased that Oryon was treating him as a comrade, assuming without question that he would do this. Ferus would have told him to continue hiding behind the speeder.

Trever swung one leg over, searching for a hold underneath. Then he slowly slid his hands down until his other toe found a hold.

They made their way upside down, looking up through the grating. Sometimes they had to curl their fingers through the grating itself to make progress. He just hoped that a stormtrooper didn't step on his fingers. Those boots looked pretty lethal. Trever knew his fingers would be raw after this, but

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strangely, the fear had left him and a grim determination to finish the job was pushing him forward.

When they were close, Oryon signaled him and spoke in his ear. "You have to go ahead. Set the timers for thirty seconds. That will give you enough time to get back. Then I'll throw the proton grenades from here. Set the charges carefully so only that catwalk blows."

Trever scabbled forward, his fingers aching. He would have to find a good place to anchor his feet and one hand while he reached into his utility belt. He made his way more quickly now, used to the feeling of being upside down. When he saw the white stormtrooper boots above, he set one charge, wedging it into the catwalk, then another and another, his biggest alpha charges. By the time he finished, his fingers were scraped raw.

Counting in his head, he went backward to where Oryon waited. "Five seconds," he grunted to the Bothan.

"Go," Oryon whispered.

Trever quickly scabbled back in the direction he'd come. But he couldn't resist stopping to watch Oryon toss the grenades.

Oryon dropped one powerful arm and lobbed the grenade. It shot straight out then curled around the edge of the catwalk, sailing over the railing and onto the platform above. Without pausing, he threw the other three grenades.

Trever felt the explosion against his eardrums. Oryon was moving fast toward him, hand over hand. The catwalk had become a living thing, buckling and waving. It could break at any moment.

He risked another look back. The platform above was cracking, metal parting from metal with a groaning, scraping sound. The stormtroopers were starting to fall into one another as they desperately searched for traction. Some were trying to vault to safety to the catwalk or the platform below.

Solace was the only one who used the explosions to her advantage. She had ridden the blast like a wave and had shot into the air. Trever watched, breathless, as she somersaulted away

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from the stormtrooper army and fell—no, not fell, *soared*, completely in control—past the stormtroopers, over the groaning metal, over the heat, over the smoke, and down, down to the sea below.

“Hurry,” Oryon urged Trever, his voice hoarse. “We’ve got trouble.”

To Trever’s horror, he saw that the catwalk was melting from the heat, shaking loose from the platform above. It must have been weakened from the battle’s blaster fire. They couldn’t make it to safety, he could see that. The catwalk began to fishtail as the platform above broke into pieces, sending stormtroopers sliding into the sea below.

“You’ve got to let go!” Oryon shouted. “We’re not going to make it!”

“Let go? Are you nuts?” Trever felt his fingers cramp from trying to hold on to the twisting catwalk.

“It’s the only way!” Oryon looked at him, his eyes intense. He suddenly flipped his legs forward and wrapped them around Trever’s waist. Then he let go with one hand and pulled Trever against him. Trever felt the strength of Oryon’s arms and legs, pure thick muscle. “I’ll be with you.”

Trever looked down. The sea looked black and dangerous. And very far away.

“I just want you to know something,” he said to Oryon. “I can’t swim!”

And then he let go.

Chapter Four

That brief conversation turned out to be one of the few Ferus had with his cellmate. Ferus knew his number—934890—but his cellmate never confided his name or anything else about himself. The only sentences he uttered were along the lines of “Move your boots.”

Within a day Ferus became used to the routine, because he had to. Any hesitation about where to line up or what to do was met with a blow and a curse from the Imperial guards. He was a step ahead of the other new prisoners. His Jedi training had taught him how to anticipate, how to read body cues, how to, as the Jedi said, “See without looking.” He was able to enter the flow of the prison without disturbance.

Also, like a Jedi, he was planning his escape. The only problem was the sheer impossibility of it. He had never seen so many guards for one prison. There were few exits that he could see. The prison itself was a square inside a square. The cells were in the interior, and the food hall was in the outer square in one corner. They left every day and marched down an underground tunnel to the factory. There didn’t seem to be any laundry facilities and the prisoners who had been here for some time looked half-dead and wore rags.

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He had seen upon arrival—because they'd wanted him to see it—that the prison was set on a small planet with a dense jungle surrounding it. There were no cities or spaceports, only the small landing platform outside the prison and a larger spaceport floating within the inner atmosphere above.

It was clear that his only opportunity to escape would hinge on the factory. They were forced to work and production levels were high. Obviously what they were doing was more than busy work; it was important to the Empire. That meant there would be a regular pickup service and a delivery supply service, most likely the same ship. That ship would be his way out. Somehow.

He would have to wait to discover the routine. He'd keep his head down, follow the rules, and not make a stir.

He wished he'd kept his lightsaber. He had handed it to Solace, knowing they would have taken it when they captured him. He couldn't bear the thought that his lightsaber, the lightsaber that had once been Garen Muln's, would be tossed on a pile with the hundreds of others, lying on a floor in a storage room at the Temple. He had seen that pile, each lightsaber representing a life, and it had been a heartbreaking sight.

Ferus adopted the shuffle-walk of the other prisoners. He didn't try to catch anyone's eye. He didn't speak. He could tell that the silence would get on his nerves after a while. He had never considered himself a social creature, but he'd come to realize after he left the Jedi that a life of solitude was not for him. He didn't like to live inside his own head.

The prisoners were kept on starvation rations. When they'd arrived, they were each run through a bio-scanner that determined the minimum nutrition their bodies needed to survive. Then their meals were calibrated by droids and individually dished out. That left them with just enough strength to work.

By the time the midday meal came, they were ravenous. Still they had to walk slowly and stay in line as they slid their trays along a long counter. Droids served the food, first flashing a

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scanner at the ID tag on their uniforms. This gave them the nutrition count for the inmate. They then used a machine to dish out some sort of mealy glop and another equally mysterious portion of something.

Still, it was nourishment, and Ferus found his mouth watering. He would eat whatever was given to him, because he'd need his strength when the time came.

The droid wheeled around, stuck a spoon in a large tin, then wheeled back and deposited it on Ferus's tray. Then another scoop of the other mass, whatever it was. Ferus didn't care. He began to shuffle forward, keeping his eyes on the back of the neck of the prisoner in front of him. They would all file to long benches at tables and would have a few minutes to eat.

He was so intent on the idea of food—he could not remember the last time he ate a meal—it must have been at that mangy bar down at the Coruscant crust—that he wasn't alert when suddenly, the prisoner ahead of him turned and, in a movement so smooth it must have been done many times, scooped Ferus's food off his tray onto his own.

But if Ferus was a bit slow, he caught up. He saw in a glance that the inmate was tall, with enormous feet and hands and gray stubble on his skull. In a lightning flash of reflexes, he put one knee in the small of the prisoner's back and one arm around his throat. At the same time, he grabbed the food with the other hand and scooped it back onto his tray.

Lunch might be disgusting, but he wasn't about to miss it.

The prisoner in front of him gagged from the pressure on his throat and tripped. His own tray went flying. Quickly Ferus released his hold and by the time the guard turned he was staring down at the floor, mimicking the exhausted shuffle of the others.

"Keep moving!" The guard lifted his force pike and brought it down on the prisoner's shoulder. He fell, dropping his tray as he went down. Still he reached for the food, even as one arm dangled uselessly. Maliciously the guard kicked the tray away so that he couldn't reach it.

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Ferus kept on walking. He ate his food quickly. He had been lucky, he decided. The scene had been over quickly and the guards hadn't seen him.

The prisoners lined up again to walk to the factory. Ferus felt someone behind him and realized it was his cellmate.

"That was a mistake." The tone was low and guttural behind him.

Ferus spoke softly out of the side of his mouth. "At least I kept my lunch."

"Your lunch is the least of your problems, my friend. You just tangled with Prisoner 67. Your problems are just beginning."

Chapter Five

Trever felt the impact of the water against his ribs and his teeth. He lost his breath and his ability to think. It was like hitting a wall. Everything was black, and he lost consciousness for a moment.

Somehow, Oryon kept hold of him. When he came to he was still against the Bothan's body. They were plummeting down into the dark water. He could feel Oryon's long tangled hair swirling around him like water snakes and was conscious of only one thought:

Up.

He didn't want to die underwater.

Oryon began to fight the momentum pushing them downward. Trever could feel the effort in every muscle. He himself felt as though he had lost control of his own body. He had never felt so helpless.

He felt Oryon's struggle to move toward air. He was kicking his powerful legs but his arms were still wrapped around Trever. With an enormous effort of will, Trever pushed himself away and began to kick on his own. Oryon kept hold of one of his arms, but now with one arm free he was able to make more progress. In this lopsided fashion they managed to stroke their way up.

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They surfaced in a burning landscape. Trever gulped down air that tasted of smoke and burning fabric. He didn't know how to swim, but he was able to keep himself afloat, treading water frantically. Dead stormtroopers and pieces of shattered white armor littered the water, though most had sunk below.

"Not so much motion," Oryon said, trying to catch his breath. "You'll tire yourself out."

Trever discovered that he was able to stay up without using as much energy. He didn't like water—never had—but here he was. *Acceptance is the key to survival. Actually, it could be the key to everything.*

Hey, thanks, Feri-Wan, Trever thought. *Maybe there's something to that Jedi stuff after all.*

"We have to find Solace," Oryon said.

It had been a tremendous fall, but they both had no doubt she was alive.

He found he was able to paddle behind Oryon. They passed chunks of floating wreckage, but it was too hot to touch and offered no perch to rest. They searched through the blackness for Solace. All Trever could see was burning material and black water. Twisted metal still hung overhead, threatening to crash down on them at any moment.

"Over here," Oryon grunted. After a moment of paddling, Trever saw what he'd spotted—someone clinging to a piece of wreckage.

The man was so blackened and bloody it took Trever a moment to realize it was Keets.

"I thought you were dead," Trever said as they made their way up to him.

Keets opened his eyes. "You mean I'm not?"

"Not yet," Oryon said.

Keets was clearly exhausted and in pain. "I slid down the leg of the scaffold and fell in. Surprised I didn't drown. This almost fell on top of me. It's probably the only thing out here that floats. So...what's the plan?"

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“Find Solace,” Oryon said. “She’s got to have an escape route.”

“That doesn’t sound like much of a plan,” Keets observed, wincing.

“Okay,” Oryon said dryly, “now I know you’ll live. You’re giving me a hard time already.”

A ripple in the dark water made them tense and draw closer to the wreckage. Trevor knew they were all thinking of the giant sea creatures they’d glimpsed on the long climb on the catwalks when they’d arrived. No doubt the creatures had dived deeper to escape the fire on the water, but there was always a chance that an inquisitive—or hungry—creature would return for lunch.

Then a dark head surfaced and they breathed a sigh of relief.

“Ready to get out of here?” Solace asked.

“I’d say so,” Keets said.

“The others?” Solace asked.

Oryon shook his head. Keets’s face tightened.

“They attacked so quickly,” he said. “Hume died trying to save a group they surrounded. Rhya...”

“I saw her die,” Trevor whispered.

“Gilly and Spence went to the rear flank. That’s where the heaviest fighting was,” Oryon said. “They couldn’t have survived. And Curran was caught in a firestorm when they torched the houses.”

Keets shook his head. “Poor Curran. He was just a kid.”

“We’ll get out,” Solace said. “We can get to my transport. It’s not far—” She broke off suddenly. “Wait.”

It took them a few seconds longer, but they heard it—the whirring sound of an air speeder. They took refuge behind the wreckage, ducking in back of it as the silver craft zoomed over their heads and made a precarious landing on a partially collapsed catwalk directly over their heads.

“Malorum,” Solace breathed.

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The commander of the stormtroopers hurried forward, trying to look purposeful despite the fact that he was picking his way carefully. It was clear he didn't quite trust the buckled catwalk.

They could hear the voices overhead echoing off the cavern walls. "Report," Malorum snapped.

"Over half our force has been lost—"

"I don't care about your losses. Where are the rebels?"

"We wiped out the community, sir. Including the Erased we were tracking."

"And the one called Solace?"

"Dead, sir."

"Show me the body."

Solace let out a breath.

"She...fell, Inquisitor Malorum. Into the sea."

"Did you see her fall?"

"Yes sir."

"Did you see her drown?"

"I saw her go into the water...."

"Get some lights down there!" Malorum roared. "I want a body!"

Within moments, powerful halo lights began to sweep the dark water.

"We've got to swim for it, and fast," Solace whispered. "Underwater. Oryon, you take Trever and I'll take Keets." She handed out Aquata breathers to Keets and Trever. Oryon had one of his own.

"Nobody has to take me," Keets protested, but it was clear that he needed help.

"Don't argue—it gets on my nerves," Solace said, hooking an arm around his chest. "Ready?"

Oryon hooked an arm around Trever. "Ready."

Taking a deep breath, they slipped beneath the surface as the lights crisscrossed the water. More and more lights appeared, penetrating the water, and Trever couldn't see how they would escape. Solace swam deeper, her powerful legs kicking. Suddenly

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blaster fire ripped into the water ahead of them. Something exploded behind them. The stormtroopers were shooting into the water randomly, probably on Malorum's orders. And they were sending down explosive devices as well.

It was impossible, Trevor thought, twisting through the cold water with Oryon. The water was so cold he could barely feel his feet or hands. He knew his body was failing him. Solace continued to stroke ahead, but he could feel Oryon tiring. Even a Bothan couldn't keep up with a Jedi. And there were too many lights now to get to Solace's ship without being seen.

He didn't know how he found the strength to go on, but watching Solace's strength somehow helped him. When she felt them flagging, she swam behind them and hooked a line onto Oryon's belt, then swam forward, Keets now on her back, his eyes closed. With immense effort, she pulled all of them through the water.

When they finally surfaced, they were far from the scaffolding where the stormtroopers were searching. They could see the lights play on the water far down the tunnel.

Solace stared back at the demolished community.

"I'm sorry," Oryon said.

"It's all right," Solace said. "Nothing lasts. I prepared for this day. If I hadn't been away, I could have gotten them all out. I had a plan...but they had a spy. It was Duro. My trusted assistant. It had to be. They got to him—offered him money, threatened him—and he agreed to betray us. He was the only one except me who knew about the warning system. He must have turned it off."

"I'm afraid you're right," Oryon said. "I saw Duro being given a speeder to escape in."

Solace's mouth tightened as she stared down at the smoke and fire. She turned back to them, her face now expressionless. "So you see, it was my mistake that killed them. I trusted him."

"There is always a reason to have only two to share information," Oryon pointed out. "Any more and you greatly

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increase the risk of betrayal. It's a first rule of a resistance. Information isn't shared."

"I know. I chose the wrong person to trust."

"Traitors exist everywhere."

Solace made an impatient move, reluctant to keep the discussion going.

"Keets, are you conscious?"

"Of course I'm conscious," he growled. "Would I miss all the fun?"

"Can you make it a little farther? You all will have to swim on your own for about twenty meters. I have a duplicate ship hidden underwater, but I have to get there alone. My last resort. I guess we've reached it."

Keets was able to smile wanly. "If ever there was a last resort, this is it."

"I'll help Keets, too," Oryon said.

Trever made a silent vow that if they made it to safety, somehow he would learn how to swim. He felt like a baby bird, flapping his arms and legs, desperately trying to propel himself. He was making progress, but at every moment he was certain if he hadn't been tethered to Oryon, he would sink.

Oryon moved more slowly, more clumsily through the water now, saddled with Keets and Trever. Solace had disappeared. Trever saw how Keets was straining to make himself light in the water, keep himself moving. The effort, Trever saw, was exhausting him. Keets' skin was so pale it shone like a pallid moon. His mouth was stretched over his teeth in a grimace. He was shaking uncontrollably. Still, he kept kicking his legs, swimming to safety, pushing his body past his own endurance.

Just when Trever thought he would gladly give up and sink under the cold water, they saw the glint of durasteel and suddenly the starship was above them, hovering. They could see Solace in the pilot's seat. The ramp lowered, just above the surface of the water, and Oryon pushed Keets onto it. He managed to crawl

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forward until Solace slipped down and picked him up easily, gently, and brought him aboard.

Trever felt Oryon's push and scrambled up onto the ramp awkwardly, as if he had hooves instead of feet. He tumbled into the cockpit. Oryon followed. He had abandoned his boots in the water and was barefoot, his furred feet bloodied. They fell more than sat in the cockpit seats. Solace had placed Keets on a bunk.

Without a word, she pushed the engines and they shot out through the cavern. Trever didn't know where they were headed...and he was too exhausted to care.

Chapter Six

Escape would feel good right about now. If only Ferus could figure out how to accomplish it. Without a lightsaber, he would have to be much more resourceful. And that, of course, was the problem. He was running out of resources, fast. Including his own strength.

Ferus had been here for only two days, but already he was feeling the effects of too little sleep, not enough food, and crushing, repetitive work.

Every day they were marched into a factory. Ferus could see that it had been recently built, perhaps shortly after Palpatine had declared himself Emperor. It had been thrown up hastily, so there were already cracks in the floor and ceiling, cracks that let in both a stinging rain and a barrage of fat, hungry insects with strong pincers that drew blood. If you flinched, you received a blow from the guards, so you learned never to flinch. You worked.

Ferus couldn't tell what they were manufacturing, only that it was a piece of something larger. The inmates were switched day to day from one task to another. Were they working on weapons? Machinery? Droids? The parts were too small or too obscure to tell. There were murmurs about an "ultimate weapon," but Ferus couldn't figure out what it could be.

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Every so often prisoners were pulled off the line and taken away, and no one ever saw them again. Ferus knew his days were numbered. He would die at the whim of Malorum. Most likely the Inquisitor was delaying his execution just to make him suffer.

Everyone avoided him now. His cellmate planned to fake an illness to get into the infirmary. Ferus spoke to him just before lights out.

“But you said that nobody who gets transferred there ever gets out,” Ferus reminded his cellmate in a whisper.

“I’d rather be killed with a shot in the arm by a med droid than be caught in the crossfire with you,” he answered.

“Listen,” Ferus said, “I can handle myself. And I don’t intend to die here.”

His cellmate looked at him, his tired gaze rueful. “You’re one of those who think they can escape. All the more reason for me to go. You’re trouble because you don’t get it. There’s no way out.”

“There’s always a way out.”

“Well.” The cellmate stretched out his legs and laughed. “You have your way and I have mine.”

His laugh, to Ferus, was the loneliest sound in the galaxy, a winter wind on a world of high deserts. He could hear in that laugh the sound of someone ready to die.

Four guards came and escorted him out roughly. Ferus watched him go with sorrow. He had a feeling that in another life, he would have liked his cellmate’s company. He had never known his name.

Morning. Or, at least, he guessed it was morning. He hadn’t seen the sun since he’d arrived. Or the moon or the sky. All this duracrete was starting to get to him. He was locked in a world of gray rock. He could see around him how the skin tones of the others, even the blue or green skin of other species, were all turning gray.

He waited for the sound of the automatic lock that snapped simultaneously on all the cells. They were then expected to file

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out within three seconds or find the end of a force pike jabbed in their ribs.

He pulled on his boots and stood by the door, waiting. Today, he decided. Today something had to change. He had to find something—a weak link in the chain, a sloppy guard, an unguarded door. Today would be the first day taken toward escape.

The locks snapped; the start of another backbreaking day.

Ferus stepped out into the corridor and they were on him immediately. He had felt no surge of danger.

Prisoner 67 and five of his henchmen surrounded him in a bloc and pushed him forward into the lineup. Prisoner 67 slipped immediately behind him. Out of the corner of his eye, Ferus saw that 67's enormous hands were poised to wrap around his throat. Meanwhile, unseen by the guards, the other four pressed close to Ferus, keeping his arms pinned to his sides. He could feel the surprising strength of their grip. Obviously stealing food from other inmates had its advantages.

Ferus understood his problem immediately, in a flash that gave him every option, recalling his Jedi training. He had no weapon. He had no means of escape, for if he stepped out of line the guards would kill him as easily as a slug—he'd seen it happen.

If he fought Prisoner 67—which, of course, he meant to do—he was certain that 67's henchmen would simply step aside, break up the shield, and watch as Ferus was taken away by the guards. Attacking another prisoner could yield several different results, all of them bad. You could be hauled away to be tortured or just killed on the spot. It just depended on the mood of the guards. And they were always in bad moods.

All of this ran through Ferus's mind in less time than it took for Prisoner 67 to step squarely behind him. 67's hands came up—big, meaty slabs capable of crushing Ferus's windpipe.

Ferus decided to use a Jedi combat method, what one of his instructors had called “attacking backward.” He would reverse an offensive move and fight his attacker without ever turning to

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engage him. Fun in a classroom fighting against other Padawans, but somehow in a brutal prison where anything goes...not so fun.

Ferus gave a sudden twist and a hard jab, loosening the grip of the prisoners next to him. But 67 was just as quick. One thick forearm wrapped around his throat. Ferus felt his vision go gray.

Suddenly out of the corner of his eye he saw something—a flicker, a glimmer—that translated quickly into the sight of a plastoid datacard winging through the air with incredible velocity and spin. Its speed was so fast it was almost invisible. Ferus ducked and it hit Prisoner 67 in the center of the forehead. His eyes rolled up and he fell heavily.

The guards heard the thump and rushed toward the sound, but by the time they reached it Ferus had already melted forward a few steps. Even the henchmen, though stunned, were able to merge with the crowd.

The indifferent guards dragged the body away.

Ferus searched the crowd without seeming to look, a Jedi technique. Whoever his rescuer was, he couldn't see him. He had rejoined the crowd. Ferus could see the other prisoners' eyes moving, also searching. No one had seen the source of the silent attack.

Baffled, Ferus marched into the factory with the others. Another day of grueling work.

Another meal of slop.

But he had something now he didn't have before. There were only a few in the galaxy who had the skill and the knowledge to turn a datacard into a lethal weapon, who could throw it from that distance without being seen.

One of them was his friend.

It was near the end of the day, as he was standing by a noisy machine, feeding bits of durasteel into it to create continuous sheets and trying not to get his fingers cut off in the process, when he heard a familiar voice directly behind him.

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“Fancy meeting you here, Olin. Thought you preferred classier joints.”

Ferus grinned without turning. “Your kind of place, Flax,” he murmured under his breath.

His rescuer had been exactly who he’d hoped he was. Clive Flax—lowlife musician. Industrial spy. Double agent.

Things were looking up.

Chapter Seven

The passageways were so narrow they had to abandon the speeder, hiding it behind some trash-compacting machines. They didn't think they could take another step, but Oryon, Solace, Keets, and Trever kept walking. Trever couldn't remember the last time he'd slept or eaten. Time was a blur, and fatigue was lead in his bones.

Solace had meandered around the levels of Coruscant, hoping to stir up any possible surveillance so that she could identify it. Only when she was sure they weren't being trailed did she follow Oryon's directions to Dexter Jettster's secret hideout.

It was in the very outskirts of the Orange District. The district had received its nickname when its inhabitants had continually changed the glowlights to orange, despite the efforts of Coruscant Utilities to keep the clear white glow intended to discourage crime. Those in the Orange District didn't care much about crime. They preferred the dim glow of privacy.

It had been only a few days since Trever had first been here with Ferus, searching for Dexter Jettster and hoping he could give them information on a missing Jedi. It seemed like a lifetime ago now.

Oryon led them down a narrow alleyway under the eerie orange light. The buildings here were smoothly rounded at the

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corners and no higher than ten or twelve stories, unusual on Coruscant. They gave the impression of gentle hills if you squinted hard, but if you really looked you realized that the lack of windows made them creepy. Trever could see the slits in the walls that served as lookouts. He felt the strong sensation of being watched.

Every time he thought they had come to the end of the alley, it turned another way or doubled back on itself. The buildings seemed to hang over them closer and closer as they walked.

On Coruscant you grew used to the constant noise, the hum of speeders and conversations and the whirr of airbuses. The quiet here was unnerving. They could hear their footsteps and their breathing.

Oryon stopped in front of a dwelling identical to all the others they had passed. He hesitated outside the door. Trever was about to ask why when he realized that Oryon was allowing whoever was inside to see him clearly, as well as his companions. Then he walked forward and punched in a code at the door. It slid open almost immediately.

They entered a hallway lit dimly by powered-down glowlights. A ramp led to an upper level; Oryon climbed it, motioning them to follow. He walked down another hallway, this one wider, but with an odd combination of clinical and military objects. A durasteel cart rested against one wall and a pile of weapons was neatly arranged in a rack. A shelf of medicines rested on a tray. Trever didn't know if he was in a hospital or a barracks.

Oryon accessed a door midway down the hall. Dexter Jettster sat on a chair that was reinforced to accommodate his bulk. Against one wall was a sole bare table. The far, opposite wall was entirely filled up with security screens. In a glance Trever could see that they effectively covered the entire alleyway, the roof, the houses next door, the sky above, and the entrance to the alley, at least two kilometers away.

Jude Watson

Dexter raised himself from the chair and lowered his head, tilting it toward them in a way that Trever remembered from his last meeting. It signaled Dex's surrender to deep emotion.

"Glad to see you." He nodded at Solace. "Happy to see you survived." He scanned them. "But not all of you made it back."

Oryon spoke first. "We know Rhya and Hume are dead. Gilly and Spence—we believe so. And Curran as well."

Dex shook his head. "No, no, not the wily Curran. He's not dead."

"I'm sorry," Oryon said. "It's impossible that he could have survived—"

"Impossible? No. Improbable, yes. He's here—a little the worse for wear, mind you. He stole an Imperial speeder and met a wall with some force, but he'll do just fine. Looked a bit like Keets there when he arrived. Come on then. I have a med center, if you can call it that. A med droid to take care Keets, and food for everyone."

Dex led them to a blank wall and waved his hand over a portion of it. The wall slid back.

Curran sat up in a med pod while a droid checked his vitals. His furred face lit up when he saw them.

"Keets! I saw you hit."

"They can hit me, but they can't kill me," Keets replied.

The med droid rolled closer, its sensors blinking. "Weak vitals. Sit on pod."

Keets moved to a pod next to Curran and sat. "Gladly."

"We'll leave you to it," Dex said. "If you're cleared to join us, we'll be in the galley."

"I'll be cleared," Keets promised.

"Negative, vitals too weak," the droid said.

"I'll be cleared, you clanking heartless hunk of sensors," Keets said. "Now fix me up, quick." He lay back and closed his eyes, finally giving in to the exhaustion and the pain.

After they got to the hallway, Dex chuckled. "He looks half-dead, that Keets, but I wager he'll be up and about in no time."

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Now come this way. I've been cooking up my special relish, and I can still dish up some sliders."

Trever pushed away his third helping. Dex had insisted that they not discuss what was happening while they ate, and although it had been hard for all of them, they'd managed to eat something without their stomachs churning. Trever was still worried about Ferus, furious and scared, but at least he'd managed to eat. Dex had regaled them with stories during their meal, stories about the street they were living on. It was called Thugger's Alley, using sub-level Coruscant slang for lowlifes and thieves. Nobody on the outside was quite sure who lived there; mostly they kept their distance.

Dex, however, knew who lived here. Some lowlifes, surely, he said with a chuckle, but more of those like the Erased, those who despised what the Emperor represented and declined to live under his rules. So they set up elaborate security and so far the Empire had left them alone.

"Of course we can't fight them," Dex said. "But we'll see them coming."

"I wish I could say the same," Solace said.

"Now, enough of that," Dex said kindly. "No looking back, isn't that the Jedi way?"

"Something like that," she replied. Her gaze was remote.

"Hmm...what's next to do, then? You don't know where they took Ferus?"

"Just that he was arrested." Trever felt his stomach lurch. He shouldn't have eaten all those sliders after all. They felt sour in his stomach now.

One of Dex's four hands came down on his shoulder with surprising gentleness. "There isn't a place in the galaxy we can't find him, so don't you worry."

"That's right," Solace said. "We'll start with likely prisons and move out from there. We'll need transports; I don't have a hyperdrive on my ship."

Jude Watson

“Transports we can get for you,” Dex said.

“That’s a random plan,” Trever pointed out. “By the time you find him, he could be executed a dozen times. What we need is information.”

Solace looked at him, startled. She wasn’t used to being questioned, he guessed. But if a plan was stupid, somebody had to say so, in his opinion.

“Do you have a better idea?” she asked, looking down her nose at him.

Trever felt his irritation flare. “Just give me a minute—it won’t be hard.”

“Now hold on here,” Dex said. “Solace, with due respect, Trever is right. If you go from prison to prison, it could take years. The Empire has more prisons than banthas have ticks. What we need is infiltration.”

Trever noticed that Curran and Keets had quietly entered the room. Curran looked stronger, his glossy hair now smoothed and pulled back into the thick metal ring. His small, furred face was alert. Keets had a bacta bandage on his side and winced as he sat down in a chair.

“It’s time for exposure,” Dex said.

He looked at Oryon, Keets, and Curran. “We’ve lost good friends on this day,” he continued. “The other Erased have gone underground again. I have a sweet spot here, and you’re welcome to share it. It’d be safe, I guarantee that, at least until the Empire feels like looking for us. Then we’ll find another. But...” Dex paused. “It’s time to join the fight, my friends. To fight means you have to risk exposure. We need to resurface.”

Curran nodded. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“I’ve still got my contacts in the Senate,” Keets said.

“And there are a few even in the Imperial Army officer corps who don’t like where they are,” Oryon added. “They might talk.”

“I’ve got friends I can ask, too,” Dex said. “If we do this, we could attract the notice of the Inquisitors. They’ll come looking, no doubt about that.”

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The others nodded. They would accept that risk.

“But why?” Trever asked them. “You hardly know Ferus. You just met him a few days ago.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Dex said. “We’re all soldiers in the same fight now. We’ll risk what we have to for our own.”

Trever looked at Dex gratefully. He knew Ferus would be touched by their help. He only hoped Ferus would live long enough to see it.

Chapter Eight

That night, Ferus's cell door slid open and the guards threw a body inside. Ferus sat up, leaning on his elbows. The door slid shut and Clive unfolded himself from his tucked position. He dusted off his dirty prison coveralls.

"I don't know why they have to do that," he said.

"How'd you manage it?" Ferus whispered.

"There's a creepy logic to this regime," Clive answered in a low tone, settling himself next to Ferus. It had been at least two years since Ferus had last seen him. He was thinner, and his thick black hair was cut close to his head. His blue eyes had dark smudges underneath them. Then again, they all looked older.

"When you rule by fear, everyone is afraid of you," Clive said, lying back and crossing one ankle over his knee. "This can have its advantages. Obviously. I mean, they're in control of the galaxy, right? But it can offer windows of opportunity for fellows like me. Hence. There's a chap in the data-works section—not an Imperial guy, just a civilian with a job. He had a slight problem with his program, and I saw him sweat. If you mess up on the job here, you get a boot in the face and a transfer to someplace worse. Does that concept boggle the mind or what? So I fixed it for him on the sly. He owed me a favor. This is it."

"So what are you in for?" Ferus asked.

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Clive stretched out his legs. “I was lying low under one of your excellent false identities—thanks for never charging me, by the way—when I saw an opportunity I couldn’t pass up.”

“Don’t tell me. A little espionage? A tiny theft of an industrial secret?”

Clive grinned. “Something along those lines. The next thing I knew, I was being arrested. They threw me against a wall and put stun cuffs on me. They traced my ID docs and somehow in a burst of their usual efficiency they discovered who I was. That was act three of this space opera, mate. Once they had my real name, they had me. Into the slammer I went. The End.”

But it wasn’t the end. Ferus knew enough about Clive to know that. He’d met Flax in the time before the Clone Wars, when he was still operating his business, Olin/Lands. He and his partner Roan offered their services to whistleblowers, beings who exposed corruption and then found the law did not protect them. Roan and Ferus created new identities for the whistleblowers and their families and also offered protection while they established themselves on new worlds. Clive hadn’t needed their protection—he had honed his own style of defense, with amazing skills Ferus had never seen outside of the Temple.

Using his abilities as a musician, he had often gone unnoticed in bars or parties while he was gathering information or stealing it. It was a living, he would say with a shrug. Once the Clone Wars started, he saw his skills as marketable. Ferus had thought of him immediately after he had been put in charge of an operation on the planet of Jabor. He had recruited Clive and sent him undercover to a Separatist base to work as a double agent. As a result, Ferus had been able to bust a Separatist spy ring that had operated throughout the Mid-Rim. It hadn’t won the war, but it had saved lives.

If there was anybody in the galaxy who he’d want to watch his back—with the exception of Roan or Obi-Wan—it was Clive Flax.

“So what’s the plan?” Ferus asked.

Jude Watson

“What plan?”

“The escape plan. I know you have one.”

“You’re right,” Clive admitted easily. “I just need an accomplice. The galaxy smiled on me the day I saw your ugly mug in here. That’s why I kept you alive.”

“You mean you only saved my life so you could use me?”

“Of course, mate. You know I only think about my own sweet self.” Clive grinned at him.

“Tell me the plan,” Ferus said. “I don’t care what it is—I’m in.”

“I’ve been stealing things for months,” Clive said. He reached inside his coveralls and laid out several items on the hard floor.

Ferus looked at them dubiously.

A servodriver.

A spoon.

A droid’s restraining bolt.

A handful of durasteel bits.

“This is what you’re going to break out of prison with?”

Clive picked up one of the tiny bits. “You see this? You put a small object in a piece of equipment in the right way, you can disable it. Disable something, you’ve got a distraction. Sometimes that’s all you need.” He replaced the scrap of metal with something like fondness. “Besides, I had a plastoid datacard, too, but I had to use it to save your sorry neck. The transport ship comes tomorrow for the new load. Are you in or out?”

Ferus gave another glance at the motley group of objects. Sure, they didn’t look like much. But Clive had just saved his life with a datacard.

“I’m in,” he said.

Chapter Nine

Malorum sat in the cockpit of his private starship on one of the landing platforms of Polis Massa.

There were too many unrelated facts in his brain. He was used to cataloging facts and swiftly reaching conclusions—that’s how smart he was—but now he felt only confusion. He hated confusion.

Think, he told himself impatiently.

He suspected that Senator Amidala had been treated here, but he could not locate any evidence of it.

One of his best agents, Sancor, had been killed here. According to the operational head of the med-center, Maneeli Tuun, Sancor had “accidentally” fallen off an observation platform and landed on some lethally sharp surgical instruments.

Accident. Did they take him for a fool?

A source had told him that a Jedi had been the one to take Amidala’s body to Naboo. Of course the galaxy believed the Jedi had killed Amidala, but Malorum knew it was a lie fabricated to slur the Jedi. He didn’t care about that. He cared only about what really happened, because it was information Darth Vader did not have. And any information Vader didn’t have could be used against him.

The funeral...

Jude Watson

Malorum tapped his fingers against the cockpit instrument panel. The funeral had been organized in haste. For such a ceremonial people, it was perhaps too hasty.

He leaned over to the nav computer. He set a course for Naboo. His work here was finished. He'd found nothing.

Instinct was telling him that his answers lay there, not with Ferus Olin. He would call in the execution order. The galaxy would have one less Jedi sympathizer in it.

That could only be an improvement.

Chapter Ten

Trever walked down a warehouse aisle, in between blocks of towering garbage. The smell was overpowering. He could see fat white gaberworms as long as his arm slithering through the waste.

Workers of many species toiled without stopping, shoveling the garbage into a machine that cubed and sanitized it. They wore face masks and gloves, but Trever couldn't imagine that those helped with the smell or the feel of the garbage.

"Told you you'd regret tagging along," Keets told him.

"It's not so bad," Trever said. "You should have seen my brother's bedroom."

The joke slipped out before he could stop it. Keets gave him a quick, sharp look. He hadn't mentioned his family before. He never mentioned his family. Their lives, their deaths, were his business.

He hated to think about them. He tried not to. It was tough coming from a family of heroes and martyrs. His mother, his father, and his brother had all fought the Empire. They had all been killed. He had no intention of ending as they did, if he could help it.

He sensed the itch in Keets to ask another question—he was a journalist, after all—but Keets said nothing, just kept leading

Jude Watson

the way down the aisle of the facility toward the friend he called Davis Joness.

Keets had filled Trever in on the background as they took an airbus fifty levels down to the facility. Davis Joness had been an influential and powerful Coruscant administrator. He had remained neutral during the Clone Wars but could not conceal his distaste for the Empire's new regulations. One day, he ran afoul of the new Imperial leadership and was instantly reassigned to garbage duty.

They found him at the end of the line, using a servoshovel to pick up the hunks of garbage that had fallen from the piles. He wore a bright orange bandanna around his head and boots up to his thighs. His eyebrows shot up over his face mask when he caught sight of Keets.

"Come to give me a hand?" he asked.

"I think I'll pass."

"You disappeared."

"Thought it might be a good idea at the time."

"Why'd you come back?"

"Usual story. I missed all this." Keets lifted his arms to take in the towers of garbage.

"Come on—we can't talk here, there are spies everywhere." Davis stripped off his gloves and tossed them onto a pile of reeking garbage.

They followed him through a green door to an outside courtyard. Trever took a deep breath of fresher air, trying not to be obvious about it. Unfortunately, Davis smelled almost as bad as the garbage he handled. There was no fresh air to be had in his vicinity.

Davis noticed when Trever moved away slightly. "Occupational hazard," he said. With a sigh, he sat down on an upended cone of permacrete that served as a stool. "Glad to see a face from the old days, anyway," he said.

"You gave me some great tips in the past," Keets said. "Are you still hooked in?"

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“Sure, I still keep my fingers on the pulse of Senatorial high jinks,” Davis said with a half-smile. “I just can’t help myself. It’s a blast watching the Senators debate about how many meters wide the Coruscant flag should be while the Emperor plans more death and destruction.”

“So tell me: Where do they send the political prisoners? The worst of the worst?”

“Don’t you mean the best of the best?”

Keets inclined his head, conceding the point.

“I’ve heard about a new prison world. Dontamo. A work prison. The most elite prisoners are sent there. If you know someone who ends up within its walls, forget them. Everybody works and everybody dies.”

Trever clasped his hands behind his back and squeezed, trying to distract himself from believing it.

“It’s not safe here,” Davis told Keets, suddenly looking around. “You’d better go. There are at least three workers here who pass along information. Those are the ones I know about. Your image was taken as you entered; they’ll put it through security if one of the workers tips them off, which they will.”

“I’m already on Malorum’s bad side,” Keets said. “I doubt it can get worse.”

“Well, you’re in luck. He’s on Naboo for the moment, or so I hear. But you’d better get lost anyway.”

Keets turned to go. Then he turned back again. “Why do you stay?”

“I’ve been barred from every profession except this one. I’ve got kids.” He balled his fingers into fists and stared at them, his eyes bloodshot, his face mottled red from exposure to garbage toxins. “What else can I do?”

When Trever and Keets returned, Oryon and Curran were talking to Dex. Solace was studying a holographic star chart.

Jude Watson

"We worked a contact in the air control," Oryon said. "A starship left the landing platform of a Coruscant high-security prison yesterday. It was headed for the Radiant One system."

"We've been reading the star charts," Dex said. "We can narrow it down to about fifteen prisons. Radiant One is a big system, well beyond the Core."

"We're trying out probability theories, trying to rank them in importance so we know where to start," Curran added.

Trever looked at Keets. They'd already looked up Dontamo on the star charts. It was in Radiant One. This was the confirmation they needed.

"You don't need to look any longer," Keets told the others. "We know where he is." He strode over to the star chart and pointed his finger. "Here."

"There's something else you should know," Dex said reluctantly. "An execution order has gone through for Ferus."

Silence suddenly filled the room. Trever closed his eyes as he felt them burn. *Not again. Not again. Not again.*

Not someone he cared about dying at the hands of the Empire.

"No," he said fiercely, surprised he'd spoken aloud. "We'll get there in time."

"I can make it in half a day," Solace said.

"We're coming with you," Oryon and Curran said at the same time.

Solace looked at them, surprised.

"We're seeing this through," Keets said.

"It's like Dex told us," Oryon said. "It's time to join the fight."

Chapter Eleven

The plan was simple. The hard part was doing it.

Ferus lay awake in the darkness, reviewing what Clive had outlined while Clive himself slept in a corner snoring loudly.

Once they were at the factory, Clive would disable a loading machine that transported the huge durasteel cartons onto the transport ship. He simply planned to disable the counting system. The fact that he swore he would be able to do this with a spoon was enough to give Ferus nightmares, so he chose not to dwell on that.

“Inventory,” Clive had said, explaining his plan. “If you mess up their inventory procedures, they go crazy. They know they’re accountable to some Grand Moffing Toffhead down the line, so it has to be spot-on. So the crates are being loaded, but they’re not being counted. That means they’re going to have to do a manual count. Which means they’ll flip open the bay doors on the transport. And that will give us our chance. After you take care of the main guard and grab his weapon—”

“How am I going to do that?”

“You’ll think of something. The other guards will be checking out the machine and watching the prisoners, because when something goes wrong, they’re afraid everyone will riot.”

“So I take out the guard...”

Jude Watson

“By that time I’ll be in position to stop the loader completely. Then you and I get on board using the bay doors, get to the cockpit, throw out the pilots, and take off.”

“There seem to be a number of holes in this plan.”

“Well, nothing’s perfect.”

Ferus thought back on the conversation now as he lay on his back. He trusted Clive, he trusted his instincts—and he also trusted that if he didn’t take this opportunity, he’d be dead.

He closed his eyes but didn’t sleep. It was before dawn when he heard the boots outside. Too early to roust the prisoners for the day.

He could see the gleam in Clive’s eyes. He was wide-awake, listening. “This can’t be good,” Clive whispered.

The boots stopped outside the door. Clive moved fast. He threw himself across the cell and punched Ferus just as the door flew open and the lights were powered up suddenly in an attempt to blind them.

“He stole my boots!” Clive shouted wildly.

“Doesn’t matter now,” the guard smirked.

Ferus was picked up and thrown into a transport cart, a small, locking box they used to move prisoners in and out...to the execution bloc.

It was his time.

The cover closed and locked. Within seconds, they were wheeling Ferus out.

He clutched a restraining bolt in his fingers—the bolt that Clive had passed him when he’d pretended to attack him. He had no idea what to do with it. It was hardly a weapon. But it was something.

Ferus was thrown into a cell. His execution order was read out loud to him. “By the order of...” “Crimes against the Imperial regime...” It didn’t matter.

The door locked behind the guards. It was a tiny cell with thick durasteel walls. There was no room to lie down and barely

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room to sit. There was no window, no chair. Nothing here but time, and very little of that.

He grasped the bolt in his fist. He couldn't break out of here with a bolt. Clive knew that. But when they came for him, when they took him to the execution room, then maybe he could use it.

You put a small object in a piece of equipment in the right way, you can disable it. Disable something, you've got a distraction. Sometimes that's all you need.

All in all, he'd rather have a lightsaber.

Already he heard them coming. They didn't let you sit for long.

He still had the Force. It was here, even on this stinking, dismal planet, even in this dark cage of a room. It was inside him and around him and he could access it whenever he chose.

He stood.

Today he would either die or escape.

It would be his choice. Not theirs.

The door slid open. There were six stormtroopers. One was an officer, consulting a datapad attached to his wrist.

"Ferus Olin, criminal from the planet Bellassa. Retinal scan." He held up a scanner to Ferus's eye. "Identification confirmed."

They pushed him into another room, a larger one, with several chairs with restraints that were bolted to the ceiling and trailed down like lethal vines. There was a med droid in the corner. So it would be lethal injection.

They pushed him past the droid. He palmed the restraining bolt as he passed. He hoped the guards would keep shoving him, and they did, poking him with their blaster rifles. He pretended to stumble and reached out with an arm to steady himself. He grabbed on to the med droid.

"Off!" The stormtrooper slammed the butt of the rifle into his shoulder.

The pain radiated down Ferus's arm. It didn't matter. He'd been able to slip the bolt into the droid's socket.

Jude Watson

They brought him toward the chair, then slammed him down into it.

“Prepare injection,” the officer said.

The droid didn’t move.

“Prepare injection!” the officer snapped.

“Restrained,” the droid answered succinctly.

“What?”

The officer turned. It was the moment Ferus had been waiting for. With one kick he sent one stormtrooper into another; an elbow sent a third spinning. The Force hummed around him as he leaped over the pile, snatching up two blasters on the way. He twisted in midair, held himself motionless for one instant to blast the droid to smithereens, then landed. He dived away from blaster fire and used the momentum to roll himself like a ball, taking down the rest of the stormtroopers. On his way up he grabbed a security card out of a stormtrooper’s utility belt.

The officer faced him, his blaster held steady.

Ferus held his blasters. Neither of them moved.

The officer fired. Ferus had already taken advantage of the instant before the blast and leaped. He fired above at the ceiling. The bolts holding the restraints in place fell. The restraining cables dropped to the floor. He wrapped the officer in them and fled.

Since he’d been in the restraint box, he wasn’t sure where he was in the prison complex. He would have to find the factory. He wasn’t sure if Clive had been able to disable the loader but he had to assume that the plan was on schedule. Clive would expect him to show up. If he didn’t, he had no doubt that Clive would leave without him...if he could.

Ferus ran through the halls. There had to be another entrance to the factory, one for the guards to use.

He found it. The blast doors opened with a swipe of the card. The racket of the factory assaulted his ears.

Glad to kiss this place good-bye.

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He ducked behind a machine. The line of prisoners kept their faces toward their work. A guard patrolled—up and down, up and down. Ferus could see no disruption in routine. In the distance, the transport freighter sat, while a conveyor ramp rolled crate after crate inside.

Then he heard the crackle of a transmitter and saw an officer walking quickly down the aisle, toward the freighter. Another officer was hurrying from the opposite direction.

Ferus was covered by the noise of the machines and the regular routine of the patrolling guard. While the guard's back was to him, he rushed forward and took down the first officer. The officer cracked his head on machinery and was out cold.

Keeping his head down, Ferus ran past the clamor of the turbines stamping durasteel into sheets and forming them into gears and pins. He grabbed a handful of gears as he ran.

By now the prisoners had noted him but they said nothing. If one of them was going to break out, he would make it or not make it. They would neither help him nor hinder him. But he could feel their avid interest in his progress and their conviction that he would fail.

The bay doors were open now, and the second officer was striding up the ramp, ready to do the manual count. No doubt he expected his fellow officer at any moment. They had a window of time to do this. Once he was unable to raise the officer on his comlink, the officer would become suspicious.

"About time you showed up." Clive was beside him now.

"Blasters." Ferus said the word not as a need but a warning.

"Wha—"

Ferus had felt the surge in the Force, warning him. He shoved Clive down as the blaster fire exploded overhead. It hit a stamping machine, sending molten fire through it.

"We've been spotted," Ferus said.

"You think?"

They raced up the ramp, zigzagging to avoid the fire from the guards behind them. Stormtroopers appeared and thundered up

Jude Watson

the ramp. Clive used an old trick, tossing the handful of gears down the ramp. The stormtroopers slipped and fell. With a Force-push, Ferus gave them an extra boost, sending them flying back onto the factory floor.

Clive gave him a surprised look but there was no time for questions. Clive hurled the spoon, end over end over end, toward the sole Imperial officer. It hit him straight in the center of the forehead with such force that the officer's eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed in a heap. Ferus quickly closed the bay doors.

"Cockpit," Clive said. "They'll be coming after us with the big guns now."

"Those weren't the big guns?"

They raced to the cockpit and barreled through the door. Two freighter pilots stood up from where they'd been lounging with one eye on the nav computer panel. They saw the blaster in Ferus's hand and the determined look in Clive's eyes.

They held up their hands. "I didn't sign on for this," one said.

"Me either," said the other.

"The door's that way," Clive said. He hit the cockpit ramp button with his fist.

They catapulted themselves out, jumping off the ramp before it hit the floor. Clive hit the ramp control again as Ferus fired up the engines.

The freighter ship shot into the sky. The prison became a gray blur in the middle of a jungle.

And then the first starfighters began to rise from the landing platform below.

"Do they have to be so stinking *fast*?" Clive muttered.

"What's the status on our weapons system?" Ferus asked, pushing the speed.

Clive reviewed the computer readouts. "Uh, not great. We've got a couple of low-power laser cannons."

"And?"

"That's it."

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“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

Ferus gave a quick glance at the nav computer. The Imperial starfighters were gaining. The freighter was old and slow. Its weapons were rudimentary. They could play hide-and-seek, but there were no asteroids in the vicinity, and anyway it would be like hiding a Wookiee behind a twig.

“We didn’t come this far to be turned into space dust,” Clive said fiercely.

But they both looked out at the ships and knew they were doomed.

Chapter Twelve

Trever and the others had kept in touch at first, but as the planet Dontamo drew closer they maintained comm silence. Even if they scrambled communications, they didn't want Imperial scouts to pick up anything.

Dex had pulled in a major favor and outfitted them with two small starships. They had seen service in the Clone Wars and their hulls were battered and pockmarked with the ghosts of small asteroid collisions and missile fire. But the engines were tweaked and their hyperdrives had been overhauled.

Trever, Keets, and Solace were in one modified ARC-170 starfighter, Oryon and Curran in an overhauled Jedi starfighter. Their plan was not much of a plan, in Trever's opinion, but they didn't have a choice. They simply had to land and see what they found. There was no time to obtain the prison specs, no time for surveillance. If an execution order had been issued, the small group of combatants had to move as fast as they could and take their chances.

Trever kept his eyes on the nav computer. He was alert for any signs of Imperial patrol ships. Oryon had told him that they often did routine inspections of the airspace surrounding the prison worlds. Every nerve inside him was screaming to land and find Ferus.

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Suddenly he sat forward. “Something’s going on. Look.” He pointed to the dots on the computer. “A ship is being chased.”

“A freighter, by the looks of it.” Solace keyed in a few strokes. “And those are starfighters.”

“Imperial starfighters chasing an old freighter? Why?”

“Not our problem. Could be good news for us,” Solace said. “They’ll be distracted by whatever’s going on, and we can—”

She stopped abruptly.

“What is it?” Solace’s face had suddenly gone still and tight, a look Trever was becoming familiar with.

“The Force. Something...” She stared hard at the screen. “Ferus is on that ship.” She reached for the comm unit. “Oryon, come in. The ship on XYZ coordinates 1138, 1999, 2300—”

“We see it.”

“Our target is on that ship. And at the controls, by the looks of it.”

“Looks like he could use a hand. Let’s go.”

Trever was suddenly slammed back in his seat as Solace took the fighter into a spinning dive.

“Did I warn you to hang on?” she yelled over the scream of the engines.

Trever felt plastered back against the seat. He had seen Solace’s piloting skills, navigating through the tight spaces and close shaves that was Coruscant air traffic. This was combat flying—fast, dangerous. It might have even felt exhilarating, if he hadn’t also felt like he was about to die any second.

“You’re going to have to operate the laser cannons,” Solace told him. “Can you do it?”

“I’m pretty good,” Trever said, even though technically he hadn’t operated any before.

“Get to it,” she said. “Just don’t shoot Oryon.”

Trever switched on the cannons. He spread his legs, keeping his balance, his eye at the scope. The Imperial fighters were firing on the starfreighter. Compared to the agile fighters, the freighter looked like a gigantic clumsy tractor plowing through stars.

Jude Watson

The starfighters hadn't realized the two newcomers were a threat, not yet. They might get a few clear shots first.

Trever lined up a shot. Almost within range. Almost...almost....

He pressed the activator—

—and was rewarded with the bloom of smoke from one of the starfighters.

“Good work!” Solace shouted. “Let me get closer. They’ll be on us now.”

Trever quickly discovered that shooting at a starfighter was much more difficult when the star-fighters were engaged in evasive maneuvers...and shooting back at him.

Space suddenly erupted in fire. It had bumps and peaks and valleys, currents of percussive bumps that Solace rode with ease, one hand on the controls, the other on her own weaponry controls.

Oryon was looping around the starfighters, peppering them with fire and trying to stay between them and the freighter. Suddenly Ferus’s voice popped into their frequency.

“Whoever you are, thank you!” he yelled.

“It’s us, sweetcake. Watching your back as usual,” Keets’s voice boomed out.

“It’s good to see you! I owe you one.”

“You owe us plenty!” Trever shouted from the gunport.

Oryon’s constant blaster hammering hit one starfighter, which spiraled out of control. Now only two were left, and Solace and Oryon proved to be the better pilots, maneuvering their ships so that they boxed the starfighters in, then blasted them. Fire burst on their wings and fuselage and they careened down toward the prison world.

Ferus’s freighter did a lazy circle around them.

“How about a rendezvous point?”

Solace clicked through the possibilities. “How about Alba-16? It’s not far, and the Empire has no real presence there.”

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“And it’s got a great cantina!” an unfamiliar voice roared through the comm unit.

“Who was that?” Oryon asked.

Trever felt his heart rise as he heard Ferus’s chuckle. It was good to hear it. He couldn’t help feeling that everything would be okay.

“Don’t ask,” Ferus said.

It wasn’t until Alba-16 was close that Clive brought up to Ferus what he’d seen. He was sitting in the copilot’s chair, boots on the console, leaning back as far as the chair would allow him to go.

“I always thought there was something odd about you, but I never guessed you were a Jedi,” he said.

“I was never a Jedi,” Ferus corrected. “I left when I was still a Padawan.”

“Never heard of one leaving. A story there, eh?” Clive said, but he didn’t ask for it. “You could have told me. I would have felt a mite easier about our escape probability factor. As it was, I thought for sure we were going to die.”

“My abilities aren’t as sharp as they were. And I had no lightsaber. I didn’t want you to overestimate what I could do.”

“Well, it was a nice surprise, mate. You did all right.”

“You didn’t have to punch me.”

“Authenticity, Master Ferus. That’s the key to every escape.”

Ferus landed the ship at the Alba-16 spaceport. It held the usual collection of freighters and haulers as well as a few personal craft. Because the planet was without an Imperial garrison, no one questioned the arrival of the ships. Behind him, the two starfighters landed. Solace popped the canopy on hers and a moment later Trever stuck his head out. He jumped out on the wing and leaped to the ground, then ran toward Ferus. Suddenly he stopped, embarrassed. Ferus saw his hands dangling. He knew that Trever wanted to show his feelings, but didn’t want to

Jude Watson

expose them. The boy was such a curious mixture of emotion and toughness.

Ferus had once been a stiff person, too, but not anymore. He slung one arm around Trever's shoulders and gave him a quick, fierce hug. "Thought you lost me, didn't you?"

"You do have a way of cutting things close," Trever said.

The rest of the group walked up.

"Do me a favor," Keets said to Ferus. "Try not to get arrested again."

"Who's he?" Solace asked, indicating Clive.

"The answer to your dreams, precious," Clive said, linking an arm through hers. "Let me buy you a grog."

In a flash, Solace slipped out of his grasp, twisted one of his arms behind his back, and had her lightsaber hilt nudged up against his chin.

"Did I mention Solace was a Jedi, too?" Ferus asked.

Solace released Clive, who smiled at her discomfort, and they all headed into the noisy cantina located near the spaceport. The music and conversation would cover their words.

Clive rubbed his hands together as he surveyed the mangy dive. "This is just about the most beautiful sight I've ever seen."

They ordered drinks and food, and Clive ate ravenously while Ferus filled the group in on what had happened to him. They told him about the attack on Solace and her followers. Ferus was grieved to discover that the Empire had acted so quickly and that the other Erased had been killed.

"The good news is that we all reactivated our information networks," Oryon said. "We were able to find out where the Imperial thugs were holding you."

"We're not ready for a real resistance movement—not yet," Keets said. "But we can see a day where we could link up with other planets."

Ferus saw it, too. It was years away, he knew. But someday the pockets of resistance on each planet would communicate

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with each other and form a network. Maybe even an army. It all had to start somewhere.

Ferus nodded. "We just have to begin. And Coruscant is the perfect place to start. The Senate has always been full of informers, people eager for a bribe. Just because the Emperor has taken over doesn't mean it isn't still true."

"Yeah, we also heard Malorum is on Naboo on some top-secret mission he concocted for himself," Keets said. "So you don't have to worry about him for a while."

Naboo. A warning bell went off in Ferus's mind. Why?

Because Obi-Wan told me to be alert to any investigations into the death of Senator Amidala of Naboo. Her funeral had been held there, in the city of Theed.

He tried to dismiss the importance of Malorum's visit. There could be any number of reasons for him to go to Naboo. But he could not forget that Obi-Wan had told him that Malorum could threaten the future of the galaxy if he was allowed to continue his investigations.

For a moment, he felt a spurt of annoyance at Obi-Wan. The Jedi Master was sitting in exile, giving Ferus a vague order to watch out for something without telling him what was at risk. Ferus would have preferred a clear-cut mission.

Yet he couldn't ignore this.

He looked around at the table. He would go alone, of course. But he had the feeling that this unusual collection of fighters wouldn't let him. He wasn't sure how it had happened or why, but they shared a bond. Even Clive.

"I have to go to Naboo," Ferus said.

Keets put down the pitcher of grog he was about to pour. "Just when I was starting to relax," he moaned.

"I'm not asking you to come," Ferus said truthfully. "But I have to go."

He felt the weight of the moment as they considered his words.

Jude Watson

Clive slammed down his heaping forkful of food. “This place has really gone downhill,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Chapter Thirteen

Naboo was a lovely world. Theed was renowned across the galaxy for its natural marvels. The waterfalls kept the air in a state of constant, exhilarating freshness. Flowers and vines twined on every gracious building. The people of Naboo were known for their warmth and cordiality, their love of peace. There was an art to living, they felt, and their food, their buildings, and their clothes indicated this. It was a beautiful, ornate world, and Malorum wanted to blast it into space dust.

Everywhere he turned, he was met with smiles and bows. When he asked questions, he was met with earnest desires to help him, thoughtful frowns, fingers clicking on data keys, careful reviewing of records.

But no answers. “Alas and sadly...” the functionary would say with a helpless shrug.

It was infuriating. No one defied him, no one refused him, but no one gave him what he wanted. As soon as he thought he had grasped something as firm as carbonite, he found he was holding only air. And there was no way he could threaten them, for they seemed to cooperate fully.

Why did he get the feeling that behind his back they were delighted to thwart him?

Jude Watson

He could see why the Emperor decided to send an Imperial battalion here despite the objections of Queen Apailana. They hadn't interfered in the planet's governance, but their presence was a necessary reminder of who was actually in charge. They had completely taken over one of the gracious domed government buildings in Theed, right next to the vast hangar. It was a smart choice. They could monitor all official comings and goings, and also use the hangar to store explosive devices should the people rebel. Strictly against Senate rules, of course, but who would ever know?

Malorum thought that the citizens of Theed would have learned something from the Trade Federation blockade years ago. They'd discovered just how vulnerable they were. The fact that they had won that particular skirmish had been mere luck. If the Emperor had been in control they would have been cowed and defeated.

Naboo was completely reliant on the rest of the galaxy for its industrial materials. They had no factories to speak of. If Malorum had been in charge, Naboo would have attacked surrounding worlds that were rich in minerals and industry. But no—they just kept on making their clay pots and their paintings and their clothes and stupidly left themselves vulnerable.

Malorum walked by the Imperial garrison, hoping the sight of it would give him fresh energy. He had visited the place where Senator Amidala's body was prepared for burial. He received no new information...except a crash course he didn't need in the funeral rites of the Naboo. Apparently the grandmothers were designated as the ones who dressed the body and prepared it for the "last journey."

The fact of Padmé's death was recorded...but that was all. There was no hint of how she'd died, nothing for him to go on. Naboo customs precluded any questions about the possible father of her child; the family was given privacy. There was no doctor's report.

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Malorum's steps slowed. How stupid. Of course, if the records did not show him what he wanted, he must go to the source. Padmé Amidala's grandmothers.

One problem was that the Naboo did not have a world directory. Citizens did not have to register with the government, something he knew that the Emperor would change as soon as he got around to it. Privacy was prized here. In addition, everybody seemed to know everybody else, through a network of clans and families. If you had to ask for an address, it was proof that you didn't know the person well enough to contact them.

A small problem. Not an insurmountable one.

Malorum crossed to the building that housed the Naboo Essentials Provider, a typically gentle name for the office that controlled the power grid. He paused just inside the door to examine a large holomap on the wall, a graphic image of the main power generator. He noted the corridors lined with electron gates, the catwalks, the bridges to dozens of levels, the deep central core. Impressive. The Naboo did have some technical expertise after all. This would be an excellent world to exploit.

He strode into the main office and demanded to see the manager. In the usual display of polite evasion he was told that the office was about to close, but if he'd come back tomorrow...

"I am a personal representative of Emperor Palpatine. Get him for me now," Malorum snapped. He couldn't wait to squeeze the information out of these maddening people like pulp from a muja fruit.

The clerk rushed into an inner office, ornate robes flowing. Malorum had been waiting, hoping for this. He strode after him. He pushed through the door, almost knocking the man to the floor.

The manager stood up from his desk, his mouth gaping. He was older, his graying hair standing out in tufts over his ears. He had a kind face and gentle eyes. Malorum despised him immediately.

Jude Watson

"I am looking for the addresses of the grandmothers of the former Senator Padmé Amidala."

"Senator Amidala, alas and sadly, is deceased."

"I am of course aware of that." Malorum slammed his hand down. "This *desk* is aware of that! I am the eyes and ears of the Emperor himself. Tell me the names of her grandmothers. I know you know them so don't waste my time with denials."

The man swallowed. He quickly consulted a hand-crafted ledger. "Winama Naberrie. Ryoo Thule."

"Give me their addresses."

"Winama Naberrie, alas and sadly, died before the Battle of Naboo."

"Then the other one!" Malorum roared at the man. He didn't like to lose his temper—he felt a loss of control was always a mistake, but he'd been provoked by hours of evasions. And it could be effective.

To his surprise, the man stood his ground. "Ah, well, I don't have that information per se, you see. This is the office of the Essentials Provider—"

Malorum had had enough of this. Always it was the same. The person would tell him he really didn't have the ability to help him while maintaining an expression of deep concern, then repeat his title or the name of the agency, and Malorum would be led round and round in a helpful, polite way that got him nowhere.

He put his blaster next to the man's cheek. "Do you see this?" No more yelling now. Just a quiet voice that held menace.

The man's expression turned to fear. "Yes."

Slowly he rotated the blaster until the barrel was pointing toward the outer office. "I am going to take this blaster and shoot everyone in this office in front of your eyes if you don't give me the information."

The man looked up at him. Incredulity turned to horror as he realized that Malorum was perfectly capable of doing it.

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He bowed his head. “Ryoo Thule now lives in the lake district of Naboo in the family villa called Varykino. In Translucence Cove.”

“That isn’t much of an address.” Malorum gave the blaster an extra push against his cheek.

The man raised his head. Something flashed there, some defiance that Malorum decided he didn’t have time to smash. Naboo would come to understand, as all worlds would, who was in charge.

“That is the way we do things on Naboo. It is the only direction I can give you.”

Malorum wanted to shoot him, but he stormed out instead.

He had what he needed. It was tedious to have to do his own investigating, but he couldn’t trust anyone else. He had to dig and dig until he had what he wanted. He knew the lake district was remote; he’d need local transport. All to see an old woman who might hold the key to something he still didn’t understand.

Chapter Fourteen

Solace and the others landed their ships on an entry platform on the outskirts of Theed. They knew the Imperials were monitoring the hangar. Clive was familiar with Theed and led them through the streets.

“The people of Naboo are no fans of the Empire,” Clive told them. “They’ll keep their mouths shut. Just follow me. I know Theed well.”

“I don’t need a tour of cantinas,” Ferus told him suspiciously.

Clive laughed. “I can show you those, too, mate. But let’s start with some contacts. I know a former captain in the army who can help us—Gregar Typho.”

“I know him,” Keets said. “I interviewed him a couple of times. Senator Amidala trusted him.”

“Lead on,” Ferus said.

Captain Typho was in an office off one of the wide boulevards of Theed. He rose from his desk a bit awkwardly, in the way of an active man who was unused to office work. He had a small eye patch over one eye and was wearing a uniform over his powerful build. He remembered Keets well and greeted Clive warmly.

“I heard you were in prison,” he said.

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“I wasn’t crazy about the accommodations. This is my friend, Ferus Olin. We’re all here to help locate an Inquisitor named Malorum.”

Captain Typho nodded. “We know he’s here. We’ve been tracking his movements. He began at the Imperial battalion offices—we know they’re setting up a spy network here. We’re keeping them under surveillance even as they spy on us. They’ve taken over a government building next to the hangar. Despite the laws of Naboo, which forbid it, we suspect they are secretly stocking weapons and explosives there.”

Curran Caladian frowned. “That’s against the laws of the Senate as well. Do you think they’re planning to take over the government?”

Typho nodded grimly. “It’s possible. They have assault ships in orbit. They’ve done this with equally uncooperative worlds, under the guise of ‘keeping order in the galaxy.’”

“I’m well aware of their tactics,” Ferus said. “They did it on Belassa, where I come from.”

“I’ve heard about that,” Typho said. “It’s what we fear. That’s why we’ve been keeping a watchful eye on Malorum. We know how close he is to Emperor Palpatine. The curious thing is that he doesn’t seem to be on official business. He checked in with the Imperial regent, of course, but after that, he’s been on his own, keeping a low profile.”

“So what has he been up to?” Keets asked.

“We’ve been receiving reports from government officials that he’s been investigating the funeral of Senator Amidala.”

His face darkened. “I too have investigated the Senator’s death. I don’t believe the official reports that the Jedi killed her. They were her friends. She believed in them absolutely; she never believed the rumors during the Clone Wars that they were abusing their power.”

“I don’t know why Malorum is interested,” Ferus said. “I only know he must be stopped.”

Jude Watson

Typho nodded. "I'll do what I can to help you. What do you need?"

"Do you know where he is right now?" Ferus asked.

"He's no longer in Theed," Typho replied. "We just got word from the Director of Essentials, who said that Malorum forced him to reveal the whereabouts of Senator Amidala's maternal grandmother. We've been trying to contact her, but she lives in seclusion and hasn't answered our comm signals."

Ferus stood. "You'll have to direct us there. But first, I need to speak to Queen Apailana."

Ferus and the others were ushered into the Queen's presence in the throne room in the palace. She was wearing her ornate ceremonial robes—deep blue with a matching headdress. Her face was painted white, with a red slash on her upper lip, called the scar of remembrance. Captain Typho introduced each of them, and they all inclined their heads in a short bow. Typho then gave the queen a brief explanation of why they were on Naboo.

"I'm honored to meet so many distinguished guests," the Queen said in her soft voice. "I offer you welcome."

"Queen Apailana," Ferus said, bowing his head again. "I have come to ask you something I have no right to ask you."

"Yet here you are," Queen Apailana said.

"I request that on my signal, you shut down all comm systems on Naboo. Internal and external comm systems."

The Queen looked startled. "That is quite a large request," she said.

"Queen Apailana, the Jedi as we knew them are no more," Ferus explained. "Jedi Master Solace and I are among the last left alive. You were once a friend of the Jedi and the Republic. Please trust us once more. Malorum is dangerous not only to Naboo but to a peaceful future for the galaxy. I know what I ask is difficult."

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"I am reluctant," the Queen said slowly. "Yet you are right—our history with the Jedi has led me to trust what they say. I never believed the official story of Senator Amidala's death. I have encouraged Captain Typho to keep searching for answers, even though it seems there are none to be had. Near the end of her life, the Senator still had faith in the Jedi. We were in constant contact, so I am sure of this. I still think of the Jedi as friends—no matter if there is one or one thousand."

"Then you'll do it?"

"On two conditions," the Queen said. "One, that you send the signal only out of the most dire necessity."

"That of course would be the case," Ferus answered.

"Two, I will shut communications down for one hour only," Queen Apailana continued. "I cannot endanger the citizens of Naboo for longer than that. We can fake an outage for a time, but the Imperial presence will become suspicious if the outage lasts any longer."

Ferus inclined his head. "That should be all I need. Thank you."

"Thank you for your service," the Queen replied. Now it was her turn to incline her head in a gesture of respect to Ferus and the others. "Thank you for not giving up."

Chapter Fifteen

Ryoo Thule had been up before dawn. She had walked down to the lake to see the sunrise. She had noticed on the way to her home, as she climbed the steep grade back to the house, that she was out of breath. Yet she didn't feel winded, exactly.

She pressed a hand to her side, then against her heart. She was an elder now, but she was still surprised when her body told her so.

She remained robust and strong, still capable of walking the steep, winding paths of the cliffsides along the lake. She just had to learn to walk slowly, not scamper up the way she had when she was a child.

That must be it.

On those early morning walks her family strolled beside her. Not the family who still lived, her daughter Jobal, her son-in-law Ruwee, their child Sola and her children, her own namesake Ryoo and her sister Pooja. Not her sister and her children.

It was her husband, long dead, who walked beside her. Her good friend, Winama Naberric (how they had plotted to marry off their children! How surprised they'd been when they'd actually fallen in love!) and her beloved grandchild, Padmé. In some ways Padmé felt closer to her now that she was gone.

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From an early age Padmé had been on her way to somewhere else. Oh, she had been the most loving granddaughter possible, but her visits had been respites from a busy life. She'd never suggested, by word or look, that this was the case. Her whole heart had been in those visits. Ryoo had felt it just the same, because she was closer to Padmé than any of her other granddaughters.

She'd had her secrets. Ryoo knew that. She'd known before Padmé had that she was in love. She'd known that love was entwined with heartbreak.

Padmé's death had broken her own heart. Ryoo had, according to custom, been the overseer of her funeral. She had kissed her granddaughter's cold cheek. She had tucked small white blossoms into her clothing and hair. She had wept on a cold floor.

The grief was still a stone in her belly, but she'd found peace here. Padmé had loved this place, and Padmé was all around her. Padmé was part of the galaxy now.

Part of her stays. Somewhere out there in the stars. I feel it. It is enough to feel it. Perhaps someday...

Ryoo stood at the window looking out at the azure lake. She pressed a hand to her chest and felt her heart flutter. Why had she woken this morning with such a sense of foreboding? Why did Padmé feel so especially close to her today?

What was this feeling? Why was she so restless?

She had been here for six months, mourning. It was time to return to her life in Theed. She wasn't too old to find a renewed sense of purpose. Padmé would want that.

Maybe that was the source of her anxiety. She knew it was time to let go of her grief, and she was reluctant. She had to remind herself that leaving this place wouldn't mean leaving her memories of Padmé behind.

Ryoo paused by the comlink station. Its insistent blinking told her of messages she should listen to. But she wasn't ready. Not now. Later. Her family was used to her returning messages later

Jude Watson

in the day. They wouldn't worry. They knew her grief needed solitude.

Ryoo smiled at that insistent red light. It spoke of the warm voices of friends and family, eager to bring her news or check on her well-being. It contained the threads of her life.

It was time to pick them up again.

She would leave tomorrow. It was time.

She heard footsteps in the reception hall below. Strange. She was alone here, without servants, and the neighbors weren't close. She would have seen a gondola, or a speeder, if someone had come to visit.

She walked down the stairs, her slippers whispering on the stone.

He stood, his face in shadow. His robe was deep maroon, the color of dried blood. For a moment her steps faltered. It was as though Death himself had come to call.

Then she recognized the flutter she had felt all morning, the unease. It wasn't old age at all, it wasn't restlessness or the realization it was time to be gone.

It was fear.

Padmé, Padmé, I'm afraid.

She told herself she was being ridiculous. She'd been right; she'd been here too long alone. She walked forward, her hand outstretched, ready to greet the stranger, for on Naboo every stranger is a potential friend.

He threw back the hood. She saw his eyes, and suddenly she understood, with absolute certainty, what she'd felt the moment she'd awakened. She'd looked for the streaks of lavender that meant the sun was rising, light infiltrating darkness. Now she knew what had been chasing her throughout the day, what she'd believed, what she'd feared.

She was going to die today.

Chapter Sixteen

The old woman was still strong. At first she appeared to greet the stranger with respect. She even offered him tea, which he refused. Malorum hadn't received the title of Inquisitor for nothing. He knew when even the most skillful being was holding back.

No matter. He would find out. He had come to the end of his journey. He had no more time to waste.

"I know about Naboo rituals," he said. "I know that you were in charge of your granddaughter's funeral."

The woman, small and sturdy, her white hair coiled in back of her head, smiled in a condescending way that made Malorum's vision go red for a moment. "No one is 'in charge' in our funeral rites. I was there to support our grieving family. Naboo, you see, is not hierarchical like your system. Yes, we have a queen, but we elect her, as well as her advisors."

Malorum felt his teeth grind. "I don't need a lesson on Naboo political philosophy."

She inclined her head, but he could see its meaning. She thought him a pompous fool.

She would learn.

Jude Watson

"The grandmother is there to make sure everything runs smoothly. This can be quite complicated in a state funeral," she continued.

"Senator Amidala died of what, would you say?"

"We don't know."

"Were there marks on her body?"

He saw her flinch. She pressed her lips together and shook her head.

"Who brought her to Theed?"

"I don't know. I was summoned after she'd arrived."

"She couldn't have come on her own," Malorum said dryly. "She was dead when she got here."

The grandmother's cheeks suddenly flushed with anger. She didn't like the casual way he spoke of her beloved granddaughter. Yet he was choosing his words with great care. The only way he would get anything out of this woman was to anger her.

"Whoever brought her to us did so with great care and gentleness, and that was all that concerned us at the time," she answered.

"She was pregnant."

Her lips pressed together.

"Did the family know who the father of her child was?"

"That is a private matter."

"Would you like to spend some time in an Imperial prison?"

"No, not really," the woman said. "But if you think threatening me with it will give you the answers you want, you're mistaken."

She looked at him. Her eyes were dark gray dusted with gold. Unusual eyes. He was almost mesmerized for a moment, seeing himself reflected in them, seeing all the contempt she felt. He got a sudden flash of what she was inside, what she was feeling.

Love. Great love.

Strength. Courage.

He pushed those irrelevancies aside and looked beneath.

Something she'd suspected, something only she suspected...

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“Padmé did not share with us the father’s name,” she said. He could see perspiration around her hairline. She was nervous. “We didn’t ask. Such things are private matters on Naboo. Because of the Clone Wars we hadn’t seen her in several months. She was the light of our lives, and our sorrow and grief is more than you could possibly know. Why you think you have a right to come here and question me is beyond my understanding.”

“I do have a right,” Malorum said. “The Emperor has given me that right. I am his personal representative.”

He was talking, but the words were too familiar, he had said them so many times. He was listening now. He was hearing what she was feeling, not what she was saying.

“Did you know Anakin Skywalker?” he suddenly barked.

“He was a friend of my granddaughter’s,” the old woman said.

“Did you ever suspect that he was the father of her unborn child?”

Something flashed in her eyes, not anger this time. Something...it was the key.

She knew something.

No...*suspected*.

He thought of the intuition inside him, what he thought of as his “river.” It had always been there. When he was younger he believed he was just smarter than anybody else. Now he knew it wasn’t intelligence, it was another sense, bigger than he was. His frustration was that he couldn’t control it the way he wanted to.

But it was here now, and he could focus it on Ryoo Thule.

His gaze must have unnerved her, for she looked away. He felt something rise in her, some hope, something she was grasping even as she battled against his will. Something she did not want him to know, and would never betray.

The knowledge ripped through his brain like a rip in fabric, tearing away his misconceptions. He almost leaped with the exaltation of it. Only the most strict discipline, the habit of years

Jude Watson

of interrogations, kept him standing, with the same expressionless face.

The child was alive.

She had spoken of her granddaughter, but never of the child she carried. That she did not was in itself a signal.

"The child is alive," he said. He could see on her face that she believed it.

Now the questions came quickly as he advanced upon her, as she shrank before him.

"Have you ever seen the child?"

"Has anyone contacted you about the child?"

"Has anyone visited the child?"

"Did Padmé know the child was living before she died?"

"Did she give the child to someone?"

"Is someone hiding the child?"

"Where is the child?"

The questions kept coming. The old woman threw up her hands as if to ward them off like blows.

When she regained control and lifted her face, it was filled with defiance. She knew little, he could see, and she would tell him nothing.

So he killed her.

Chapter Seventeen

The beauty of the lake was astonishing. Varykino perfectly fitted into the landscape, turrets and domes rising from the rocks and water as they sped toward it, so close to the lake that their Naboo water craft, a gondola speeder, kicked up a wake.

Ferus barely noticed the deep jewel color of the lake, the arcing sky overhead. Before the gondola speeder had come to a halt he vaulted off it. He was filled with foreboding.

He and Solace left the others behind as they Force-leaped up the cliffs, finding toeholds and handholds while in midair. The others charged up the path.

The door to the graceful villa was wide open. He charged inside, his lightsaber held aloft.

Ryoo Thule lay crumpled on the stone floor. He leaned down and with great gentleness touched her cheek. It was warm.

Suddenly her eyes opened, giving him a shock. He'd thought she was dead. Her life force was almost extinguished.

Her eyes widened just slightly when she saw his lightsaber. He felt her fear dissolve and she looked at him with something like friendship. With that one glance he knew Padmé's family did not blame the Jedi for her death.

"He suspects," she whispered.

"Malorum?"

Jude Watson

A nod. Then suddenly she seemed to gather strength. Strength enough to grab his tunic. “He can’t tell anyone what he knows. You must protect...”

She lost her breath. Her fingers opened and she fell back.

“Protect what?” Ferus felt the urgency. He was lost in implication and mystery and everything he didn’t know.

“For Padmé,” she whispered. “For Padmé.”

Life left her then.

He turned. Solace sat behind him on her haunches as easily as if on a chair.

“Want to tell me what’s going on?” she asked.

Ferus looked at her helplessly. “I can’t. I don’t even know. I just know there’s a secret that threatens the galaxy. Ryoo knew it, and now Malorum does, and we have to stop him. Obi-Wan Kenobi warned me.”

She rose smoothly, quickly. She didn’t need any more information. What he said was enough. “Kenobi? Then let’s do it.”

They ran out the door. The others were just hitting the top step.

“It’s too late,” Ferus said. “He’s gone. But I think he’s around here—we would have seen him take off.”

“He must have hidden his craft,” Oryon said.

“This flaming coastline is full of coves,” Clive said. “But we should send the signal now!”

As soon as that was done, Ferus said, “Let’s split up into twos. Malorum is a handful. Stay here, Trever.”

“No.”

Clive whistled. “It’s so inspiring how he follows orders.”

Ferus couldn’t wait to straighten it out, so he took off alone. He knew Trever would follow, and he also knew the boy would stay undercover. His heartbeat drummed inside him with urgency. *The future of the galaxy is at stake*, Obi-Wan had said. *The secret can’t get out.*

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Luckily the communications were being jammed, so Malorum couldn't share his information.

Until the hour was up.

Ferus leaped to a spot on the steep side of the cliff, then jumped again. His boots landed in soft sand.

He heard the lapping of the blue water. The song of a bird. He felt the Force gather and now he could not only hear everything with crystal clarity but feel it as well, pulsating through him.

The Living Force was near. The dark side of the Force pulsed. He raced down the beach in that direction. A cluster of large rocks was scattered in the bay, and he Force-leaped onto the first, leap-frogging from one to the other until he was past the point of the land. Now he could see Malorum in a speeder gondola, ready to take off. Malorum looked over and saw him and the craft shot forward over the lake.

Ferus vaulted into the air and soared toward the craft. Malorum suddenly yanked on the steering mechanism, so the craft was headed straight toward him now at top speed. Ferus reacted as a Jedi. He did not retreat. He used the advance of his enemy to his own advantage.

He stopped his momentum in midair, waiting out the microsecond it took for Malorum to reach him. Then he somersaulted neatly over the craft. He used the updraft to power himself out of harm's way, then dropped onto the gondola.

Well—not dropped, exactly, in the neat way he could have accomplished even as an apprentice. Rather, he fell awkwardly, sprawling on the hull.

Sometimes the Force worked for him. Sometimes it didn't.

Malorum yanked the craft to the right, dipping it close to the water. Ferus flipped over, his feet skipping over the surface. At this speed, the water felt like permacrete.

"Ow," Ferus grunted through his teeth as the gondola bumped along and he hung on for his life. "Ow, ow, ow."

Jude Watson

Using all his strength, he flipped himself back into the boat. This time he was able to access the Force with more precision, pivoting on his hands and delivering a well-placed kick to Malorum's chest. Malorum was knocked backward, loosening his grip on the controls. The gondola began to spin crazily. Ferus was almost thrown off the craft but reached out and grabbed on to the curved stern to steady himself. He reached for his lightsaber and activated it just as Malorum began to pepper him with blasterfire.

It was impossible for the Inquisitor to aim in these conditions, but he was doing a good job of trying. Ferus used the curved stern as a fulcrum, swinging around it as the gondola bounced, his lightsaber fending off the red and orange blaster streaks.

Off in the distance he saw the other gondolas approaching. Solace piloted one with Oryon hanging on grimly. Curran and Keets were in the other. Where were Trever and Clive?

Malorum pulled back the fabric of his robe on one arm. Ferus felt the warning as propulsion. He leaped at his assailant. In midair he saw the gleam of the rocket launcher on Malorum's wrist. Malorum surprised him by rolling underneath him and then releasing the rocket.

Solace saw it before the others. She turned her gondola violently, shouting at Curran as she did so. He was too late. Unable to save the ship, he and Keets leaped into the water. The explosion sent shock waves across the lake.

And then Ferus saw Clive and Trever. *Of course*, he thought. The two thieves had stolen a boat.

It was a fast craft, sleek, with a chromium hull and a repulsorlift engine. Larger than the gondolas, it was still highly maneuverable and tremendously fast. Clive was piloting it straight at Ferus and Malorum.

The gondola was still moving at top speed, but without a pilot it swung in arcs and bounced on air currents and waves. Clive was heading straight for them, no doubt hoping to distract

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Malorum. It was a good plan. Ferus only hoped he didn't fall off before it happened.

Suddenly the air was alive with armored Imperial IPV-1 patrol craft. Malorum must have called them in before the Queen had been able to cut off communications.

The water around them exploded as the missiles hit. The missiles were designed to intimidate. They couldn't risk hitting Malorum. But some of the patrol craft peeled off to attack the other gondolas and Clive and Trever's boat.

Ferus watched as one patroller dipped toward him. He leaped at Malorum, who shot his blaster at close range in Ferus's face. Ferus managed to deflect the blaster fire but Malorum dove toward a liquid cable that suddenly appeared above, higher than Ferus imagined he could. Malorum didn't bother to hook the cable, he just hung on as the IPV-1 took off higher, trailing Malorum behind.

Ferus leaped and managed to grab the tail end of the cable. In midair he saw the missiles heading for Clive's boat. Clive and Trever leaped off at the last possible second as their vessel was obliterated. At the same moment, two other patrol craft went after Curran and Keets, bobbing in the waves. The remaining Imperial pilots all turned toward Solace in the last gondola.

Ferus looked up into the muzzle of a repeating gun. He saw Malorum's fervid, triumphant face. He let go of the cable and dropped into the cold blue lake.

Chapter Eighteen

Ferus plunged into the cold water as far down as he could to escape the fire above, inserting his Aquata breather into his mouth as he swam. He pushed forward in the direction he'd last seen Trever. He wasn't sure how good a swimmer the boy was, or if he could swim at all. He didn't know if Clive had a breather. Standard equipment for some, but not for others. Thanks to his Jedi training, Ferus was in the habit of having one on his utility belt, even if he was traveling to a desert world.

The water was so clear he should have been able to make out the others, but instead he saw nothing, just endless blue. Ferus fought against disorientation. He'd seen the others dive into the lake—where could they have gone? He swam farther down, feeling the pressure on his ears. He began to feel anxious. He couldn't abandon his friends, but he had to get back to Theed.

Suddenly he saw a strange sight—a shimmering transparent bubble heading toward him through the water. Was it some strange sea creature?

No—it was a ship. A ship shaped like a creature with a long tail. Inside he could just make out the shapes of beings.

Gungans.

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Of course. Gungans ruled the underwater world of Naboo. From all he'd heard, they were friendly beings. Although they could wage a pretty nasty battle if they had to.

Just his type.

The strangely beautiful sub bobbed closer to him. The cockpit seemed to bend as it came closer, and Ferus stopped, motionless in the water, fanning his arms to keep himself in place. He felt no fear, only wonder.

A hand reached out through the cockpit bubble and somehow pulled him in. The rest of the group was crowded inside. Trever gave him a wan smile. Water streaming from his clothes, he dropped into a seat next to Solace.

"Nice rescue," he panted.

"Meesa welcome you to the bongo on behalf of all Gungans," their smiling pilot said. His friendly eyes twinkled at Ferus. "Good to stay underwater when the mackineek troopers are above."

"Where's Malorum?" Trever asked.

"He escaped," Ferus said. "I have no doubt he's on his way to Imperial headquarters at Theed. That's surely where he left his transport." He turned to their pilot. "We need your help."

"Meesa can take you anywhere you want—"

"No," Ferus interrupted. "All of you." He reached quickly for his comlink. After only a few seconds, he was put directly through to Queen Apailana. It was the only channel that had been left open.

"I need to call in another small favor," he said.

"You ask for much, Jedi Olin."

"You have no idea."

Now Trever had seen *everything*. He couldn't get over it. The underwater city had suddenly appeared, a series of huge bubbles like illuminated lamps. Inside were wide pathways with shadowy patterns and a murky green light.

Jude Watson

And Gungans—he'd never even heard of them. He liked their friendliness and their loose-jointed strides. He felt safe in their underwater city. He would have liked to forget about everything happening above, but of course he was with Ferus-Wan, the owner of a one-track Jedi mind. Ferus asked to be taken immediately to their leader, explaining that he and Solace were Jedi.

Their rescuer, the pilot Yunabana, had been so excited that he'd taken them directly to Boss Nass at a run.

Boss Nass resided in his own series of bubbles. While most of the Gungans were slender, Boss Nass was huge. His green skin had a grayish tinge, and Trever could tell he was an elder. He had three double chins and was wearing an elaborate coat the same color as his skin, so he resembled a giant greenish blob. He sat in a huge chair with waving fronds.

Now the Queen of Naboo was on holoprojector. The Naboo and the Gungans both felt that they owed the Jedi a great debt. They believed that the Jedi had been their only true friends during the Trade Federation blockade and had been responsible for helping them liberate their worlds. They readily agreed to a conference with Ferus.

Trever stood back with Clive, Keets, Curran, and Oryon as Solace and Ferus thanked Boss Nass and the Queen, and Boss Nass thanked the Jedi, and the Queen thanked Boss Nass, and Boss Nass thanked the Queen for what seemed a very long time, and finally everyone was silent.

"What is it that you want from us?" Queen Apailana finally asked.

"Wesa glad to help if help is needed," Boss Nass said. He placed his hands on his belly and leaned back.

Ferus looked a bit nervous. He never looked nervous. Trever saw him swallow. It must be a big request.

"I need you both to use your security forces to attack and destroy the Imperial headquarters," he said.

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Boss Nass jumped to his feet. "Yousa crazy?" he roared. "Attack Imperials? Maxi-bad strategy mesa friend! Yousa noticed they be controlink the wide-sea galaxy?"

Queen Apailana's tone was milder, but it was clear she was shocked as well. "Surely you realize the retribution that would be inflicted afterward upon both the Naboo and the Gungans. The Emperor would crush us. It would be swift and terrible, and many civilians would perish."

"That's for sure," Trever said under his breath. Ferus shot him a look that he didn't need a translator for. *Don't speak.*

"I understand the magnitude of what I ask," Ferus said.

"Why do you ask then?" Queen Apailana said.

"The future of the galaxy depends on it," Ferus said. "That I can promise you. The head of the Imperial Inquisitors, Malorum, has found out an important secret. If he is able to reveal it to the Emperor it could destroy any hope we have of someday living in peace and true justice."

"What is this secret?" the Queen asked.

"That I can't tell you. Yet you must trust me. We must strike this blow here, now."

There was a pause, so Ferus continued. "I have a way to avoid retribution. I would not propose this otherwise. I promise that no harm will come to your people."

"I'm listening," Queen Apailana said.

Boss Nass sat back. "Mesa, too."

Ferus turned back to Queen Apailana. "Your information network has reported that the Empire is illegally stockpiling destructive weapons in the Theed hangar in defiance of Senate regulations. If we blow up the weapons cache it would seem like a disaster the Empire had brought on itself. The officials back on Coruscant would wish to hush up the explosion so that the Senate wouldn't hear about it. The Emperor may despise the Senate, but he still needs it to cloak his crimes."

"Your plan depends on our winning the battle," Queen Apailana said.

Jude Watson

“The combined might of the Naboo and Gungan warriors can defeat a battalion,” Solace said. “They’ve gone up against far worse and won.”

“I have the greatest confidence in the courage and daring of both your peoples,” Ferus added.

Queen Apailana said nothing. Because of her elaborate makeup, Trevor couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

Suddenly Boss Nass lurched up, slapping the arms of his chair. “What a berry good trick, you say, Jedi! Get rid of Empire, protecting all our people, and no onesa ever thinkin’ well of us! Bringsa out the fambaa anda power us up!”

They all turned to the holographic screen. The Queen’s image was still impassive.

“Yes,” she said slowly. “It is a berry good trick, as my friend Boss Nass says. And it might remove the Empire from Naboo for some time. If it works.”

“Will you commit your forces?” Ferus asked. “We can draw up the battle plans here and coordinate when we reach Theed.”

“Faster issa to goes underwater,” Boss Nass said. “Wesa can bring the army thatta way.”

“We’ll be ready,” Queen Apailana said.

Chapter Nineteen

Ferus and the others waited aboard a Gungan military launching ship beneath the lake in Theed. Since the Trade Federation battle, the Gungans had designed troop transports, long and narrow, that could navigate the water caverns that networked below the surface of Naboo.

The transports lined up underneath the lake, their mineral skins tinted blue-green for camouflage. They waited for the signal from Captain Typho. Ferus exchanged a glance with Trever. He no longer bothered to order Trever to stay behind. It was a waste of breath.

Solace, Ferus, and Oryon would leave first. They were to head immediately to Imperial headquarters and break in. Ferus would split off and go for Malorum. Solace and Oryon would head off any attempt of Imperial officers to escape. Usually the higher up the officer, the more you could count on their having a separate escape route from the rest of the battalion.

Clive had begged off being included. "I'm a solo act," he told them. "Wars make me nervous."

Solace had snorted her disapproval.

The signal came. The Gungan ships rose slowly and then burst through the surface. Ramps slid out and connected with the land. Ferus, Solace, and Oryon raced off the ship.

Jude Watson

The Naboo security force was already mobilizing in the streets, marching toward headquarters. Ferus could see several panicked stormtroopers racing to return to the building. Already ranks were forming lines on the building's wide steps. The first fire rang out from the front lines.

He would join the fight, but first he had to find Malorum.

They raced around the corner of Imperial headquarters and released liquid cables. It brought them up to the first bank of windows. Ferus had already networked with the Naboo and knew where the officers were located.

Solace paused. The sounds of battle had escalated. "May the Force be with you," she said.

Ferus nodded and took off through a window. He ran down the halls, which rang with confusion as officers scrambled to load data onto computers, no doubt following some sort of Empire protocol for a surprise attack. Others ran toward the back of the building where Ferus knew it connected with the Theed hangar.

That was where Malorum would be headed. He wouldn't stand and fight. He would cut and run.

Ferus increased his speed, mowing down stormtroopers that got in his way. The thud of his boots sounded out his purpose. He held his lightsaber aloft.

He burst through the grand double doors of the hangars. Amid the gleaming ships and stacks of cartons he saw the flicker of a red cape. Malorum had seen him and was running away. He chased him down a long hallway that connected to another grand building.

The hallway opened up into a gigantic circular area. Platforms and bridges were stacked hundreds of meters high. The space was filled with a low-level hum. He was in the Theed power generator.

The knowledge thudded through his brain. This was where the great Jedi Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, had fallen. Every Padawan had heard the story.

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It was here, Ferus thought. This is the place Obi-Wan fought Darth Maul to the death.

But now it was different. He wasn't fighting a Sith. He was fighting an Imperial Inquisitor—skilled, with powerful weapons, yes. But not a Sith.

Then Malorum turned, baring his teeth in a smile. And showed Ferus his lightsaber.

Chapter Twenty

Ferus was startled. He and Obi-Wan had both felt that Malorum was a Force-sensitive. But that was a long way from being proficient with a lightsaber.

Where had he received lightsaber training? Malorum held the lightsaber easily in a classic ready stance, the red shaft projecting downward.

Ferus circled him slowly, holding his dark gaze. So. A former Jedi and a Sith pretender were about to fight. Interesting.

Malorum charged. The two lightsabers clashed. Ferus felt a surprising amount of power from Malorum. Maybe this wouldn't be so easy.

But it would be done.

He whirled around in a one-hundred-eighty-degree turn, kicking out with his foot at the same moment. He missed Malorum's chin by a whisker. Ferus liked to fight with his boots as well as his lightsaber. He had learned to fight without a lightsaber when he'd been a regular citizen of Bellassa. Sometimes that meant fighting dirty. Looking for openings, using whatever materials came to hand. He could still street-fight if he had to.

He fought without urgency just yet, circling Malorum, challenging him, watching him for weaknesses. Ferus ticked them

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off in his head. Malorum relied on agility but had little grace. He had strength but did not know how to use it effectively. But most of all—and this was what Ferus was sure would defeat him—Ferus could feel Malorum’s emotion in his style. Anger fueled his attacks. It was a mistake many made. Not a Jedi.

After feints and attacks, they came to a long passage with curving walls. A series of energy gates ran down it. Electron rays pulsed in a rhythmic fashion. Ferus remembered this from the story he’d heard as a Padawan. The energy gates had slowed Obi-Wan and he’d been unable to come to his Master’s aid in his final battle with Darth Maul. In those crucial seconds, he’d watched Qui-Gon receive the fatal blow and fall, right before his eyes.

Here he was in the middle of a battle, and he was suddenly pierced with a sharp sympathy for Obi-Wan. For the past weeks he’d been intimidated by the Jedi Master, irritated by his silences, upset at his decisions. Now he fully realized how little he understood of what lay beneath.

I can't imagine what he's seen. How he's suffered. What he's lost.

He made it through the first energy gate but suddenly they buzzed shut behind and ahead of him. Malorum was in the next chamber. How odd it was to see your enemy and be unable to move.

He could just make out Malorum’s words.

“You can’t stop me,” Malorum said. “You can only slow me down.”

“Oh, I’ll stop you,” Ferus replied. “Even though I’ll miss our conversations.”

The energy gates sprang open. Ferus jumped forward, swinging his lightsaber. Malorum parried and came a little too close to connecting to Ferus’s shoulder. He had to leap backward, and the energy gates shut again.

“I’ve learned from the best,” Malorum grunted through his teeth.

“Siri Tachi. Obi-Wan Kenobi. Soara Antana. Yoda himself.” Ferus didn’t know if Malorum could hear him, but he felt the

Jude Watson

names of his teachers resonate inside him like a powerful chant. “You don’t know what the best is.”

The energy gates opened again and Ferus surged forward, driving Malorum backward. “Want to be a Sith, Malorum?” he taunted. “Is that it? Palpatine’s puppy is tired of biting ankles?”

Rage darkened Malorum’s face. Good. Exactly what he’d hoped.

Malorum sprang forward in a fast combination that Ferus had a tough time parrying. The dark side of the Force hummed with him now as his anger grew.

Okay, maybe it was time for a new strategy.

Malorum reversed directions and was able to run out onto a catwalk. Ferus leaped to follow him. He wondered if Malorum was heading for an exit. He knew if Malorum was able to get out of here, he would lose him. It was almost as if Malorum knew the way and was leading him on. Maybe he was trying to lead him back to the Imperial army, hoping they were still fighting.

They fought furiously now, using every inch of catwalk. They fought around the deep central core, hundreds of meters down. Ferus used his advantage of Force agility to leap and somersault, giving power to his thrusts. He fought using the lightsaber only, saving another kick or an elbow for when he needed it, when Malorum wouldn’t be looking for it.

He pushed Malorum back, forcing him to rely on balance to avoid falling into the pit below. Malorum twisted and turned, but he was beginning to sweat.

Ferus saw his chance. He left himself slightly open, and Malorum charged. As he came in, Ferus slammed his elbow directly into Malorum’s forehead. It stunned him for a split second, and Ferus used the hilt of his lightsaber to smash Malorum’s lightsaber out of his hands. The lightsaber shot outward, directly over the pit.

Malorum’s mouth opened in a cry that echoed off the walls. “No!” he shouted. Ferus could feel the Force pulsing as Malorum leaped into the air, straining to catch the lightsaber as it

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spun. Straining to harness the Force to push the lightsaber hilt toward him and carry him safely to the next catwalk.

*Don't...strain...*Ferus watched Malorum make the elemental mistake of any early-year Jedi student.

He saw that Malorum was blinded by need. If he lost the lightsaber, he would be disgraced. He would never be a Sith.

Malorum's lightsaber dropped like a stone. Still in midair, Malorum lost his grip on the Force. His cape flapped around him, and Ferus saw the panic in his eyes.

Then he dropped down, down, down, into the central core. And Obi-Wan's secret went with him.

Chapter Twenty-One

The battle was over. Smoldering stormtroopers lay on the streets. Fallen officers were in the building where they'd taken refuge.

Captain Typho strode toward Ferus as he emerged from the Theed generator. "Your friends are all safe," he said, before Ferus could ask.

Ferus saw a blur of brown and blue, and Trever ran toward him, his blue hair flying, his tunic torn. "Did you get Malorum? Did you stop him?"

"He fell into the central core of the generator."

"So the secret is safe," Solace said, coming up to them. "Whatever it is."

"We'll clean up quickly," Captain Typho said. "There will be no trace of battle. We've been monitoring the comm system. Coruscant Imperial Control is trying to raise the battalion here but getting no response. They're sending a ship to investigate from a nearby system. It could be here within the hour. It's time to blow the weapons cache."

"Looks like we're up, mate," Clive said to Ferus. "It'll be a mite tricky, but I think I've got the explosives figured out so we can get out in time."

Ferus blinked at him. "You *think*?" he asked.

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Clive grinned. "Your pal here helped me with a few ideas."

Ferus looked at Trever.

"Don't look at me that way," Trever said. "I'm not coming with you this time. Do you think I'm crazy?"

Clive and Ferus entered the great Theed hangar, empty now of all personnel. The area around the hangar had been cleared of people and any valuables, just in case the hangar blew up the surrounding area. Theed pilots had flown a few ships to safety, but they would have to sacrifice some of their fleet so that the blast wouldn't look suspicious.

"The trick is to arrange the stuff so that it blows here, in the center," Clive said. "The shock wave will go down, not out. But this side wall has to pack some explosive power so that it blows the Imperial headquarters, too. We have to account for the loss of those stormtroopers."

"Let's do it," Ferus said.

They approached the boxes cautiously. Clive began to open them with a vibro-cutter.

"Some of this is highly volatile baradium," Clive said, eyeing the instructions on the durasteel boxes. "Just don't drop anything."

"Right," Ferus muttered.

Carefully, they picked up the boxes and bins and moved them to the center of the hangar. They took the highly volatile synthetic explosive and pushed it against the wall. Then Clive carefully walked through, setting the sequence charges. "Trever fixed these so that they'll disintegrate with the blast—no trace of metal or explosive will remain. They'll never know we blew it."

"So how are we getting out in time?" Ferus asked.

"The pattern is designed so that one alpha charge will set off an explosion that will set off the next, and the next, and so on, until it gets so bloody hot in here that the whole place goes up. It's going to be one crazy blow," Clive said fondly.

Jude Watson

“Clive? How are we getting out?” Ferus asked, enunciating each word.

“Oh. I have a plan.” Clive placed the last alpha charge against a drum of missile fuel.

“Good,” Ferus breathed in relief.

“We run.” Clive placed the last charge down and set it. “Now!”

Ferus spurted after Clive, cursing him in his head. Clive was one of those insane individuals who enjoyed extreme danger. Ferus felt the first explosion at his back. He felt the heat on his neck. He charged toward the doors. The next explosion gave him a push at the small of his back that almost sent him sprawling. The third made the air come alive. He rode a wave of air out the double doors and landed on his knees on the street. Clive rolled over, laughing.

“Come on, it’s not over yet,” he shouted.

The Imperial headquarters blew as they raced under a pedestrian bridge. The bridge fell in a shower of mellow ochre stone. Ferus grabbed Clive and Force-leaped to safety.

Sprawled on their backs, they watched as half the hangar burned and Imperial headquarters collapsed in a heap of rubble and a giant cloud of dust.

Coughing, they made their way to Solace, Oryon, Keets, Curran, and Trever, who were standing with Captain Typho watching the awful spectacle.

“I’m sorry about the building,” Ferus said. “It was a gracious part of Theed. It will take a long time to rebuild that hangar.”

“It is a thing,” Typho said. “The people of Naboo are more important.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

The orbiting space platform in the Rainbow Nebulae was somewhere between Naboo and nowhere, and it was a good place to stop. The group refueled there. It had been imperative that they take off from Naboo immediately.

They all stood together while their ships were hooked up to the refueling stations. The sky above vibrated with red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet.

"I heard from Typho on the way," Ferus told the others. "The Empire is investigating, and it's already clear that they're going to engineer a coverup. There will be no retaliation on Naboo. And it appears that Malorum died in the explosion."

"Love it when a plan works like a well-timed chrono," Clive said.

There was a pause. It was time to say good-bye, but no one was sure who was going where.

Ferus was anxious to return to the roving asteroid base. There were things to do, systems to set up. He needed to contact Obi-Wan and tell him that the threat posed by Malorum was over.

"I have a safe place," he told the others.

"You only have to navigate through an atmospheric storm to get there," Trever amended.

Jude Watson

"You are all welcome," Ferus said. "Each one of you is now an outlaw from the Empire. You'll need fresh text docs, a place to lie low."

Ferus looked at Solace. He was creating the base for surviving Jedi. Solace had told him she wanted no part of it. He hoped she would change her mind.

"All right, I'll come," she said gruffly. "But just to check it out."

Oryon looked at Keets and Curran. "We've been talking. As the Erased, we've hidden away for too long. We want to return to Coruscant. But we would welcome a place to be quiet and make plans."

"After this little adventure, I could use a rest," Clive said.

"You're going to come?" Solace asked disdainfully. "I thought you were a solo act."

"Must be your sparkling personality," Clive said.

Ferus's comlink signaled. That was strange. There were only a few people in the galaxy with access. He walked a few steps away from the others. The message played, a miniature hologram.

He stared, listening, and ice entered his veins.

He walked back to the others and placed his comlink on his palm. He held it out. "I think you need to see this."

An image of Emperor Palpatine shimmered in the air. "Greetings, Master Olin, for I think you deserve that title. Times have changed, and you've changed with them. I think our departed Inquisitor Malorum was a bit too hard on you. On behalf of the Empire, I'd like to offer you amnesty."

"Hey, what about me?" Clive demanded of the message.

"And I'm issuing you an invitation," Palpatine's message continued. "Come visit me on Coruscant. I give you my personal word that you will have safe passage. Let us speak together, and if what I offer doesn't interest you, you may take your amnesty and go. This offer stands for twenty-four hours from the receipt of this message. I hope to see you soon. We have much to discuss. Until then, farewell."

STAR WARS: Death on Naboo

The hologram faded.

Ferus looked at his friends. “So,” he said, “what should we do? Accept a date with the Emperor?”

STAR WARS[®]

LAST ^{OF} THE JEDI

A TANGLED WEB

BY JUDE WATSON



NEW YORK • LOS ANGELES

Chapter One

He hadn't seen Palpatine since he was seventeen. Ferus Olin remembered a pale, soft-spoken man with a sharp political mind. Chancellor Palpatine always had an air of deference to all, despite his considerable power in the Senate.

But things had changed.

He was the Emperor now...and his power had turned sinister.

Ferus was shocked. Palpatine's face had sunken into itself, his cheeks collapsed, his eyes hollowed. He wore a concealing hood, but it couldn't hide his newly grotesque appearance. The whites of his eyes had turned yellow, and his skin was deeply furrowed.

No wonder he no longer appeared on the HoloNet for official pronouncements.

Obi-Wan Kenobi had told him that Palpatine was a Sith. That he had fought in a battle with Mace Windu and had defeated him, but the effort of it had left him horribly scarred. Ferus hadn't known what to expect, but this was worse than he could have possibly imagined. He could feel the dark side of the Force in the room. He had to fight to keep his concentration.

Palpatine's aides, Sly Moore and Mas Amedda, stood at both ends of his desk. His Royal Red Guards—six of them—stood at attention near the exit door. A thin graying man with sunken cheeks, dressed in an Imperial uniform, stood near them. Ferus

Jude Watson

had no idea who he was, but the way he stood spoke of a certain importance.

All this, Ferus thought, for little old me?

Palpatine had contacted him only a few days before. He had asked him to this meeting, even though Ferus had recently escaped from an Imperial prison. The Emperor had guaranteed his safety. When Ferus had arrived, he'd undergone a standard weapons check, but to his surprise, Sly Moore had allowed him to keep the lightsaber he had clipped to his utility belt. He hadn't bothered to hide it. He knew Palpatine was aware that he had one.

"Please sit," Palpatine said, gesturing to a chair. "Make yourself comfortable. You see we allowed you to keep your weapon. A lightsaber...how interesting. And here I thought you were a *former* Jedi."

"Former apprentice, actually."

Palpatine sat and folded his hands on his desk. Ferus wrenched his eyes away from the Sith's long, deeply furrowed nails, caked with dirt. "I could hardly expect you to admit to being a Jedi, seeing that they were traitors who tried to bring down the Republic."

"I'm confused," Ferus said. "I thought it was *you* who brought down the Republic. Didn't you declare an Empire a couple of months ago?"

"I'm curious as to how you obtained a lightsaber," Palpatine said, ignoring Ferus's question. "Strange to see, because we received reports that a ship had landed on Illum, where so many lightsabers are created."

"Did you? I'm glad to hear it's still a popular place."

Palpatine gave a thin smile. "Only for the Jedi, and they are all gone now."

"I heard that, too."

"It was a shame that such a respected order overstepped its bounds so badly."

"Is that what happened? I had no idea."

STAR WARS: A Tangled Web

Ferus felt sweat bead up on his hairline and hoped the Emperor wouldn't see it. He was feeling Palpatine out, trying to provoke him. But Palpatine just continued to speak in the same deep, sonorous voice, close to expressionless.

"Perhaps now we should discuss why I asked you here," the Emperor said.

"I have to admit I'm curious," Ferus said.

He had debated whether to come. He had been on a remote space station with his crew when the summons came. They were a scruffy bunch, made up of members of a group called the Erased, which included Keets Freely, a former journalist, and Curran Caladian, who had been a Senate aide. Also along was Clive Flax, who had escaped from the same prison as Ferus. Ferus was fond of Clive, who had been a double agent during the Clone Wars but claimed to owe allegiance to no one but himself. And then there was Trever, the street kid who'd been traveling with Ferus. Trever had been a stowaway on his flight from his homeworld of Bellassa, and the two had journeyed together ever since.

Also along was Solace, a reluctant traveler. She'd once been the great Jedi Knight Fy-Tor-Ana. She'd changed her name and had tried to forget her past existence as a Jedi. So she hadn't been too thrilled when Ferus came along, suggesting she team up to find other missing Jedi.

They'd been on their way to the secret base Ferus had set up for any Jedi he might find, when the summons had come from Palpatine. Ferus had been trying to get back there for weeks now. He needed to know how Jedi Master Garen Muln was faring. Ferus had found him in the caves of Illum, waiting for death to take him. He'd still been weak when Ferus had left him in the care of his friends, Raina and Toma.

The Erased had all conferred, argued, and then, in the end, decided that Ferus couldn't ignore the summons. Besides, they reasoned, he might learn things from Palpatine that could be useful in the coming fight against him.

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It was too dangerous for his friends to be near the Senate. They had gone to the secret hideout of Dexter Jettster, hundreds of levels below on Coruscant. If Ferus didn't return that day, they would come looking for him.

The thing was, he'd just had a hard time breaking out of an Imperial prison. He didn't want to end up in one again.

"I don't break my promises," Palpatine said. "You will be allowed to leave once you hear my proposal. I'm hoping you will accept it, but if not, the door will be open. However, I have no doubt you *will* accept."

Think again. There was no way Ferus would help the Empire. But for the moment, he'd keep his mouth shut.

"I'll let you be briefed by Moff Tarkin, who has been in constant contact with our Imperial advisor on Sath."

The tall man with the gray skin and dark hair took one step forward.

"We have received a request from a planet called Samaria through our own Imperial advisor there," he said. "The Samarian ruler has asked us to send an emissary directly from this office to help them. Their mainframe computer for the city systems of the capital city of Sath has been infiltrated. A bug has been introduced into the system that has transferred personal information from one citizen to another in a random pattern—and thus has thrown the banking, medical, and social services into chaos. Not only that, but the city systems have also malfunctioned. Do you know Samaria?"

"I've heard of it," Ferus said. "Never been there. I do know it's a desert planet, completely dependent on technology. I would imagine that this problem would eventually lead to major systemic breakdowns."

"Excellent," Palpatine said. "You have the picture entirely. Already, there is danger that the planet will collapse into anarchy."

Tarkin continued in the same terse tone. "The bug has been introduced so cleverly that no one can figure out how to kill it.

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Every time they've tried to fix it, it sends the programs into another random sequence. If the planet has to start over and collect information on every citizen, it could be disastrous." Tarkin stepped back, his moment in the spotlight over. He seemed such a colorless presence...yet Ferus's instincts told him to beware.

"You can see why I've come to you, Master Olin," Palpatine said. "Since you've popped up, I've had occasion to read your file. You have an impressive history since leaving the Jedi. You're the best in the galaxy at computer security."

"I wouldn't say the best."

"I would."

In a former life, Ferus had been an expert at computer systems and identity coding. His company, Olin/Lands, had helped people disappear into new lives and had been expert at security wipes and the creation of new ID docs.

He could guess how much trouble the planet of Samaria was in. But that didn't mean he'd be an agent of the Empire.

"You were the most proficient in the galaxy," Palpatine continued. "No one else has been able to solve this problem. Your job will be to trace the saboteur through the system and find the key that will lead you to who did this. Then the Empire can restore the planet to stability. After all, stability is why the Empire began. We will reign over an unparalleled number of peaceful years. And we will always reach out a hand to help any planet in distress."

And if you believe that, you'll believe anything.

"I appreciate your problem," Ferus said. "Unfortunately, I can't help you."

Under the hood, the dark gaze flickered.

"I'm needed elsewhere," Ferus continued. "Now, since you assured me your exit door was open, I'll take my leave."

"If you must. Let him go," Palpatine instructed the Royal Guards.

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Ferus walked toward the door. He waited at any moment for the Guards to strike him down on Palpatine's order. He wouldn't hesitate to use his lightsaber. If he had to die here, he would. There was no way he was going back to prison.

"There is just one more thing you should consider," Palpatine said.

Ferus stopped, his eyes on the door—and freedom. Here it was. He must have been a fool to think for even a second that Palpatine would let him go.

"You probably haven't heard the news. Your partner, Roan Lands, has been arrested."

Ferus felt the name like a stab in his heart. His partner. His friend. Roan.

Still, he kept his face to the door. He wouldn't give Palpatine the satisfaction of seeing his face.

"Along with an acquaintance of yours, Dona Telamark."

Dona, who'd hidden him when the Imperial soldiers were hunting him. Who'd asked for nothing and had given him everything. She was an elder woman, strong and sturdy, who loved her mountain home and her solitude. The thought of her in a prison was wrenching.

"They are both," Palpatine said, his voice rising, "scheduled to be executed."

Ferus tried not to shake.

"For what crime?" he asked.

"Conspiracy against the government of Bellassa."

What a joke. The government of Bellassa was under the domination of the Empire. Nobody would be foolish enough to conspire against it.

Palpatine's voice curled around his ear, thick and rancid. "However, if you could extricate yourself from your other commitments, I could request leniency from the Bellassan government. Perhaps even clemency."

There it was—the catch.

Just like that. Snap. He was caught.

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He'd expected a catch. He just hadn't expected it to be so personal.

Chapter Two

Trapped.

He'd walked right into it.

He'd had to agree to Palpatine's request. He'd had no choice.

Furious, he strode down the hallway that connected him to the main Senate building. He couldn't believe he had just agreed to work for a Sith.

He felt disgusted with himself, but he saw no way out—not if Roan and Dona's lives were on the line. Now he was headed to the Senate landing platform, where Palpatine had arranged a starship for him.

The usual crowd of senatorial aides, assistants, droids, and Senators swirled all around him. BD-3000 luxury droids hovered near the Senators, oozing compliments into ears and fluffing up capes. It was a sight he remembered well from his years on Coruscant.

Yet he did not feel the same sense of busy discord he remembered from earlier times. Once there had been the buzz of conversations and arguments. Now there were blocs of Senators walking in lockstep, their rich robes in bright colors. Their collars, the larger the better, were made of fur or stiff silk and framed their glossy, well-fed faces. They were followed by trails of assistants, dressed just a shade less extravagantly than their

bosses. Ferus saw more displays of wealth, and less displays of deference. There did not seem to be the busy hum of important work being discussed.

The Senate had changed, and he wanted no part of it.

A new addition to the Senate was the constant presence of Prowler 1000 seeker droids. They could be assigned to track any individual. He was certain that from the minute he stepped foot outside Palpatine's office, his movements were being watched.

He'd have no opportunity to get to Dex's hideout now. He couldn't even risk using his comlink. He had to assume that comm transmissions were monitored. Somehow he'd have to find a way once he was on Samaria. He couldn't trust the comm unit on the ship, either.

Trapped.

Ahead he saw a worker mopping up the hallway. Dressed in bright yellow coveralls, the man bent over the vibromop, putting as little energy as possible into the task. His dark hair was covered by a rag that he had knotted in four corners, and he wore a face mask, no doubt to protect his lungs from constantly breathing in the strong cleanser. He swung the vibromop wide, and Ferus had to dance away in order to prevent himself from tripping over it.

"Sorry about that, mate," the worker said, and Ferus realized with a pleased shock that it was Clive.

"I see you've found your calling at last," Ferus murmured. He bent down to pretend to examine a spray of cleanser that had dotted his trousers. "They've arrested Roan and Dona."

The prowler buzzed overhead, and he moved on. Within a few steps he saw a cafe, one of the many eating areas tucked underneath the overhangs on the Senate's main hallways. A waiter was sponging off a table, dressed in the gray tunic the servers wore. Now that he was alert for it, Ferus picked out Keets right away.

He stopped at the counter and ordered a small cup of juice. He stood, sipping it, as the line moved forward, shielding him

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momentarily from the prowler. Keets approached to wring out the sponge at the sink near Ferus.

“Heading directly to Samaria,” Ferus said as he turned away.

He walked down the hallway, turned the corner, and saw a young boy selling the *Senatorial Record Digest*. Although the Senate cam droids sent official transcripts directly to the computers of the Senators, many of them still preferred to pick up durasheet copies of the digest, which summarized the events of a day, hour by hour.

This time, the newsboy was Trever, his bluish hair covered by a cap with a visor that shadowed his face.

Ferus reached out for the newssheet. “Blackmailed me to take the job,” he said, tossing Trever a credit.

He pretended to scan the *Record* as he walked, then tossed it in a wastebin by a fresher. He waved his hand over the sensor to enter. The prowler followed him inside. The droid was as impossible to shake off as bantha drool.

He paused to wash his hands. An attendant handed him a towel. It was Oryon, his Bothan friend. Oryon had swathed his powerful frame in coveralls and his luxuriant mane in a close-fitting cap.

He dried his hands. “Computer systems crash on Samaria,” he murmured.

He walked out. He knew that they would pass each tidbit of information along until they had a full picture of his dilemma. Despite his predicament, his heart felt full. He was surrounded by friends. Each one of them was wanted by the Empire. Each one of them was endangered by being here. Yet they were here.

Ferus reached the landing platform. He saw a pilot drinking a mug of tea by the opulent personal transports of the Senators. He was a slender Svrenini in a pilot’s uniform. It was Curran Caladian, his furred face neatly combed, his bright eyes covered by the visor on his helmet. Ferus walked by him, pretending to admire a gleaming Nubian yacht with a chromium hull.

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Drawing closer, he said, "I'll be going to the city of Sath. Reporting to an Imperial advisor."

He walked on. The only one of his crew he hadn't seen was Solace, but he didn't expect to. Out of all his friends, she was the most wanted by the Empire. The entire Imperial army and security forces, as well as Coruscant police, were on the alert for her. She had fought a battle in the underworld of Coruscant, trying to protect the group she'd gathered in the caverns of the underground oceans. She'd personally taken down squads of stormtroopers. It was truly too dangerous for her to be here.

An Imperial officer met him at the ship and told him the coordinates were already entered into the nav computer. The ship would need no refueling. He was not to stop at any space station. They were awaiting him in Sath. He was to land directly on the prime minister's landing platform.

The officer turned away as Ferus started toward the ramp. Suddenly another pilot accosted him.

"Don't think you're jumping the fueling line, fella," she said in a grating tone. "I've been here for twenty minutes."

It was Solace. She had disguised herself so well he didn't think he'd have been able to pick her out if she hadn't said something. She seemed taller and broader. She wore a black helmet and gloves up to her elbows, and tall boots.

"Got all the info," she told him quickly. "I'll take Trever and Oryon to Bellassa to track Roan and Dona. Trever knows the ropes there. Keets and Curran will stay on Coruscant and dig for information. Clive will follow you to Samaria."

Her calm dark eyes met his for a moment. "I will find Roan and Dona. I'll bring them to safety."

It was a promise, from one Jedi to another.

They didn't say it, but their gazes sent the message: *May the Force be with you.*

Ferus turned and strode up the ramp. Moments later, the ship shot out into the space lanes. He headed for the hyperdrive ring, and he was off.

Chapter Three

Samaria was a small planet in the tiny system of Leemurtoo, in a strategic area of the Core Worlds. After receiving permission to land, Ferus buzzed over the city of Sath to get an airborne view.

The Samarians had manufactured a huge bay that was channeled into large canals that ran through the city. Along the edges of the bay, the engineers had built fingers of white sand that flung out into the aquamarine water, forming flowerlike designs. On these fingers were the most exclusive buildings, primarily residences and offices for the rich. The buildings were topped with domes that competed for attention, each with its own rich color and metallic inlays.

The complex of buildings that comprised the royal court of Samaria took up one whole flower made up of ten long petals with gleaming white buildings built of synthstone.

Ferus decided to ignore his instructions to land on the private landing platform of the prime minister of Samaria. Instead he headed for the main spaceport of Sath. He could always claim ignorance, and he wanted to get a feel for the city on his own, before he was briefed by some Imperial or government functionary.

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“Boots logic,” his Master, Siri Tachi, had called it. She meant get your feet on the ground, look around, and get a feel for the place yourself, instead of relying on the data you were given.

After landing, he activated the ramp and received a blast of heat from the dry air. He headed over to register with the dockmaster, a Samaritan who waved him off. “You’ve already been cleared. The spaceport is closed to all vehicles but those with Imperial registration,” he said. He turned back to the pile of durasheet records on his desk. “Can’t believe I have to do this without a computer,” he muttered.

“Why don’t you just wait until the data is up and running again?” Ferus asked.

The Samaritan looked up and blinked his mild blue eyes. “But then I’d be behind.”

“True,” Ferus said. He recognized a dedicated bureaucrat when he saw one.

“Take the turbolift down to the city levels. If you take an air taxi, you take your life in your hands. Space lanes are free-for-alls now. No controls at all.”

Ferus nodded and walked to the turbolift. He took it down to the main level of Sath. It was a three-level city, with buildings of various sizes punching through the main street levels. Laid out on a grid, it had numerous ways for pedestrians to navigate with lift tubes, mobile ramps, and movers that could carry up to forty people at a time. All of the walkways were under cooling systems and shaded from the hot sun. Many buildings were connected by covered walkways at various levels. It was possible to walk the entire city without going outside. Fountains had been designed to refresh the air but were now shut off, no doubt because of the citywide system failure.

Ferus alternately walked and hopped on a repulsorlift mover. He saw disorder everywhere. Obviously the breakdown of the system had affected everything. The people were distressed, milling about, carrying on anguished conversation and desperately waiting in long lines. Considered highly advanced, the

Jude Watson

system on Sath didn't use physical credits, relying on computers to record every transaction, from a mug of tea to the purchase of a speeder. Now there were long lines at banks, clinics, and food distribution outlets. Frustrated Sathers crowded the streets, relying on barter to get what they needed.

Lighting systems were on half-power. Huge vidscreens that had once broadcast news and information were blank. The air lanes were snarled with traffic.

He could feel the panic in the air. This was a society on the brink of spiraling out of control.

Ferus finished his journey at the expanse of a blue-green bay. He hopped a repulsorlift ferry to take him out to the large, flowerlike span where the government residences were built. The heat was like a blast from a flamewgun as he made his way down the empty boulevard.

He reached the gate to the palace and stood in front of the vidscreen, then realized it wasn't working. He looked around for a button to push or a comm device to activate but met only the smooth stone wall of the gate.

Then it slid open and he stared into the muzzle of a blaster rifle. The soldier was dressed in sand-colored fatigues. "State your business."

"Ferus Olin. I'm expected."

The soldier checked a durasheet. "This way."

Ferus followed him into the entryway to the palace. It was a large, sprawling white structure with seven domes inlaid with stone the color of the sea. Huge slabs of stone had been cut and placed in a striking pattern on the floor of the entryway. The glowlights were set in beautiful globes of blue glass. Ferus followed the soldier into a reception area lined with long, low seating with tapestried cushions. He stood in the center of the tiled floor, a mosaic of a map of Sath. He looked down and reflected how fragile a mighty city could be.

He waited for fifteen minutes, until he realized he was deliberately being made to wait. Rather an odd way to treat an

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emissary from the Emperor. He had long ago learned—not from Siri, who could be so impatient, but from Obi-Wan—that part of diplomacy is never being irritated at being kept waiting, but using it to your advantage. So he used the time to study the map of Sath and memorize the main boulevards and districts.

At last the doors slid open and a tall man with graying hair entered. He was dressed modestly in a dark tunic and pants, and Ferus was surprised when he introduced himself as the prime minister of Samaria, Aaren Larker. He had expected someone in rich robes, someone who would match these opulent surroundings.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting,” Larker said. “I was in conference with the Imperial advisor. He’ll be along in a moment. I assume that you were briefed on Coruscant.”

“I was briefed by the Emperor himself,” Ferus disclosed.

“Imperial Advisor Divinian is here to oversee the search for the saboteur,” Larker said. “You are to work closely with him.”

Ferus inclined his head. He had no intention of working closely with anyone.

“Divinian,” he said. “Is that Bog Divinian, the former Senator from Nuralee?”

Larker nodded.

Ferus was surprised. He’d met Bog Divinian before the Clone Wars, when he was still a Padawan. Bog had been married to a friend of Obi-Wan’s, Astri Oddo, but Ferus had lost track of both of them when he’d left the Jedi Order. Bog had fallen into disgrace after he’d conspired to take control of the Senate from Chancellor Palpatine. He’d been kicked out of office and scorned by his own people. How odd that the Emperor would allow him to gain such a high title, when Bog had once conspired to unseat him.

The doors opened again. Now Ferus realized fully why he’d been kept waiting. Bog wanted to make sure that Ferus knew that even though he’d been sent by the Emperor, it was Bog who was in charge.

Jude Watson

“Ah,” Bog said, by way of greeting. He held out a hand but didn’t move. Ferus had to step forward to greet him. Bog was dressed in the gray tunic that most Imperial functionaries wore to match the soldier’s outfits. Over it, he had thrown a royal blue cloak embroidered with gold thread. He had aged since Ferus had last seen him, ten years ago at the Galactic Games. His hair was dyed jet-black, and his florid face was now broad. His middle had thickened and his hair had thinned.

“Ferus Olin,” he said. “Welcome to Samaria. I trust you found the Emperor in good health.”

Ferus didn’t think that “good health” would under any circumstances describe the Emperor, but he nodded anyway.

“The government of Samaria asked for our help,” Bog said, folding his hands and putting on a grave expression. “Naturally the Empire was quick to reach out a hand. I am that hand,” he said portentously.

Which I guess makes me a finger, Ferus thought. But he kept his mouth shut. It was important to keep Bog on his side, at least for now.

“The prime minister here seems to have lost control of his planet,” Bog continued in a jovial tone. “Haven’t you, old friend?”

Ferus saw the flush of annoyance on Larker’s face. The contempt within Bog’s tone made it clear again who was in charge here.

“How kind of you to elevate me to old friend when we’ve known each other such a short time,” Larker said in a polite tone. Ferus strained to hear the sarcasm in it but could find none. Nevertheless he knew it was there.

“A friend in need, indeed,” Bog continued. He wheeled and addressed Ferus. “You were supposed to land at the palace,” he said.

“I wasn’t aware I was under orders,” Ferus replied.

Bog stared at him expressionlessly for a moment, then let out a booming laugh. “Just so! You’re not in the Imperial army! So I

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suppose it makes sense to reject the advice of those who know better. The space lanes are dangerous in Sath.”

“I walked,” Ferus said.

This brought an incredulous look from Bog. “In the heat? I guess you’re not aware that Samaria is a desert planet, ha-ha!”

Ferus was getting bored with Bog’s attempts to put him in his place. He turned to Larker. “Have you had many problems with lawbreaking?”

Relieved to have his expertise consulted, Larker shook his head. “Not yet, but of course it is of concern. So far the Sathans are making the best they can out of a hard situation.”

“Yes, I see that they’re setting up a bartering system,” Ferus said.

“We’re working on establishing government-approved values,” Larker said. “That way, everything will be clear, and the people will be able to figure out how to get food and fuel. That is our most important job at the moment. The saboteur has left no trace in the system. Every time we go in to try a fix, something else malfunctions. One day we’ll have our transportation running, or our space lanes monitored, and then the next they’ll be out again.”

Ferus nodded. “I’ve seen this kind of bug before. If the saboteur is clever enough, it can be extraordinarily difficult to fix.”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to crack it,” Bog said, obviously annoyed at being left out of the conversation. “Then we’ll get everything under control.”

Everything under his control, Ferus realized. This would be a test for Bog. Ferus would fix the problem, Bog would take the credit, rise in the Imperial hierarchy, and be the real power on the planet. It was a transparent plan, and the funny thing was that although Ferus was aware of it and Larker was undoubtedly aware of it, Bog still thought that his plan was shrouded in mystery. There was nothing worse, Ferus thought, than a dull man who was convinced of his cleverness.

Jude Watson

But he couldn't underestimate Bog. He knew from experience that the combination of aggressiveness and ambition could make a being dangerous. Especially with the full might of the Empire behind him.

Now Ferus realized why he'd been sent. This wasn't about helping a planet—not that he'd believed that in the first place. Bog's presence here and the way he treated Larker made it clear: This was about taking over Samaria. If Ferus fixed their central computer system, he'd be giving the Imperials the method to control the planet completely.

Chapter Four

The spaceport at the city of Ussa on Bellassa was tightly controlled by the Empire. All arrivals and departures were monitored. Since Trever was wanted on his home planet, he needed to arrive with false ID docs.

Thank stars and planets, Trever thought, *for Dexter Jettster*. He had turned out to be a crucial ally for them. He was a member of the Erased on Coruscant, one of those who had completely wiped their identities in order to hide from Imperial security. Dex now lived in the Orange District on Coruscant, with access to the best identity thieves the planet had to offer...and that was saying something.

It had taken Dex less than an hour to pull together what they needed. He'd given them text docs and credits and a wardrobe—everything they needed to pose as a group traveling to Bellassa for its renowned spa treatments. Solace would be a wealthy woman, Trever her son, and Oryon their bodyguard.

To Trever's surprise, the no-nonsense Solace had agreed with the ruse, readily donning the fur-trimmed cloak and aurodium-colored boots of a wealthy woman. "Sometimes it's better not to sneak when you're breaking in," Solace said. "Make as much noise as you can, and nobody gives you a second thought."

Jude Watson

Now Solace stood at the top of the ramp of the chromium-hulled starship that Dex had borrowed for them from a wealthy friend. She was resplendent in her rich ruby chaughaine robe. The black fur collar fanned out around her angular face. Instead of the scruffy warrior they were used to, she looked striking and regal. Trever wore a close-fitting cap made of some expensive material that itched.

He couldn't suppress a tremor of nerves as they waited to be checked in by Bellassan security. After all, he was wanted on this planet. He'd stolen a gravsled and pretended to be a laundry worker so he could break Ferus out of an Imperial prison. His image had been captured on a vidscreen. They could get touchy about things like that.

Dex had made sure he was well disguised. He was wearing a cap, and a large visor covered his eyes and most of his nose, a fashion among the young wealthy Coruscanti.

Solace created a stir around her, ordering security officers to hurry, and even hailing a corporal to carry her bag. Quickly she established herself as a presence to be placated. Security officers rushed to clear them, hurrying them to the front of the line and then quickly checking their ID docs against their list of those wanted by the Empire. Trever tried to appear bored, as if he were used to being coddled and swept through security.

The official looked over their docs with a skeptical eye. "You're here for the spa treatments? Haven't you heard about the unrest?"

"I came here for rest, not unrest," Solace said haughtily. "And I intend to find it. I'm not going to let some rabble-rousers come between me and my lasersalt rub treatments."

The official returned the docs. "Just don't go out alone."

"That's what I have my bodyguard for," she snapped.

They were cleared.

Trever's heart was tripping in his chest. It wasn't just about the fear of getting caught. It was about being on Bellassa again.

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When he'd left his homeworld, he'd never wanted to come back. Stowing away on Ferus's ship was a way to escape a place that held only bad memories. His mother, father, and brother had all died here. When they'd been a family, they'd always been together, going to concerts at the Ussa halls and outdoor venues, or playing laserball in the many parks. Almost any corner could suddenly blast him with a memory. He'd enjoyed being part of the black market, because it meant he could stay in a quadrant that was unfamiliar to him, rarely venturing into the neighborhoods he'd known.

But here was Bellassan air and Bellassan light, and they were as familiar to him as his own skin. *Home*. He fought against the concept, but here it was.

Another security officer rushed to hail them an air taxi. They entered, and Solace told the driver to take them to the Eclipse, the most exclusive hotel in Ussa. Trever had lived in Ussa all his life and had never been inside.

When they got to the hotel, the extraordinary service continued. Their luggage was whisked away, and check-in was accomplished in a matter of seconds. Soon they were stepping into a transparisteel turbolift that whisked them up to the two hundred and second floor.

Trever let out a disbelieving whoop as soon as the porters left them alone. He had a full view of Bellassa now. On this cloudless day, he could clearly see the seven lakes, the winding roads, and the pink and blue buildings in the soft, clear light.

"Can we stay here forever?" he asked. He was joking, of course. But deep inside he felt a connection to this world. It hadn't been wrong to leave, but it felt wrong to stay away.

"Just a day," Solace said. "Maybe less, if they figure out the account number I gave them was a phony. Dex said we have about eight hours until it comes up blank."

"Let's get moving," Oryon said.

"What, no room service?" Trever asked with a grin.

Jude Watson

They changed into less conspicuous clothes and took the turbolift back downstairs, leaving by a side entrance. Trever led them down the boulevards. His home city of Ussa had changed in the short time he'd been gone. The Imperial forces had cracked down hard after the entire city had rose in passive resistance against them. Stormtroopers were on every street. Security checks were set up on corners.

They passed a café where Trever and his family used to go on weekends. The waiter used to sneak him special sweets. Now Imperial officers crowded the best tables....

He looked away.

"It's a sorry sight," Oryon said.

Trever shrugged. "This was never my favorite part of town, anyway."

Oryon gave him a quick look, his dark eyes piercing. Trever knew he hadn't fooled him one bit.

They continued on, Trever leading them through the winding streets. It was easy to get lost in Ussa if you weren't a native. The presence of stormtroopers grew less frequent, and though some prowler droids occasionally passed overhead, they must have been set on general surveillance, for they always moved on. Coded to intimidate rather than track.

Trever was leading Solace and Oryon to the hideout of The Eleven, the now-famous resistance group. Everyone on Bellassa knew about The Eleven, but not many knew how to find them. They were named after the core group who had started a resistance movement soon after the declaration of the end of the Republic. Roan and Ferus had been two of its founders.

The Imperials had quickly moved to establish a garrison on Bellassa, and the objections of the natives were met with fierce oppression and mass arrests. The initial number of eleven members in the group had grown until now it was rumored to be in the hundreds.

Trever's father had known Amie Antin, a doctor who treated the members of The Eleven. Trever had been one of the few

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allowed into their original hideout. He knew his father and brother would have joined The Eleven if they hadn't been killed by the Imperials during a peaceful protest.

The Eleven had chosen their hideout carefully, but it wasn't remote. The block was like all the others, neither too busy nor too deserted. Their house looked like the other family houses on the block.

"That's it?" Solace murmured as they approached. "We're in the middle of an ordinary neighborhood."

"That's the point," Trever said. "The Ussans have incredible loyalty to each other. The Eleven depend on that. Even if a neighbor suspected something they would die before they betrayed them."

"How do we get inside?" Oryon asked.

"We go in the back way."

Trever led them through a gate that was, surprisingly, unlocked. The path led them to a paved back area with a table and chairs. Beyond the sitting area was a wall with no door. Trever stood in front of it for a long minute.

"What are you doing?" Solace asked.

"Allowing them to see me. Amie Antin knows me. Wil, too. They'll let me in, even with two strangers."

"The trust of the Ussans," Oryon said.

"Exactly."

Part of the wall slid back, and they saw a ramp going down. The opening was big enough to hold a speeder. They followed Trever as he descended, and found themselves in a small holding area for vehicles. A door at the far end opened and a lovely woman of middle years with close-cropped white hair and dark eyes walked forward, smiling.

"Trever. You disappeared. Must I always worry about you?"

"Sorry, Dr. Antin. I decided to ship out and see the galaxy."

Amie shook her head. "Well, maybe that's not such a bad idea, considering how things are here. I'm glad to see you're well."

Jude Watson

“My friends and I are here to help Roan and Dona.”

“I guessed as much. We can use help. Come in.”

Amie led them inside to a small interior room. Wil was sitting at a data screen. Trever saw that he'd been monitoring the backyard and the street, most likely to ensure that they weren't followed.

“Where are the others?” Trever asked, looking around.

“We've disbanded for the moment,” Wil said. “They've spread out in the city. The Imperials haven't managed to completely subdue Ussa, but the crackdown gets worse every day. They're determined to control the planet. So we have our work cut out for us.” He gazed at Solace and Oryon with polite curiosity. “What brings you to Ussa?” he asked.

Trever introduced Solace and Oryon. “We heard that Roan and Dona were arrested,” he said. “Ferus sent us. He's well, but he can't come.”

“Do you have any news of where they might have taken Roan and Dona?” Solace asked.

“Not much, and what we know isn't good,” Wil reported. “We know they were taken aboard a ship. We've heard rumors through our spy network that the ship serves as a detention center and also a courtroom—so that political prisoners aren't tried on their homeworlds or indeed anywhere they can garner support. They are tried and sentenced in space, then taken directly to a prison world. The Empire can claim a fair trial but keep it all under wraps.”

“The plan is for the ship to travel constantly through the galaxy, picking up political prisoners,” Amie explained. “We have all our sources working on it, but we have no idea of its present location.”

Trever felt his face fall. If Roan had been on Bellassa, they would have figured out a way to get to him. But the galaxy was a big place.

“Do you know where the ship left from?” Solace asked.

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Wil nodded. "The main Imperial landing platform. They retrofitted a Corellian YT transport. It's called the *True Justice*."

"There's only one way to find it," Solace said. "We have to infiltrate the landing platform and gain access to their tracking system."

Suddenly Wil's screen began to beep. Everyone looked at it in alarm.

A squad of stormtroopers marched down the middle of the street, peeling off in groups of five to investigate each house.

"House-to-house search," Wil explained. "New policy. They pick random quadrants of the city. Just bad luck." He turned to Amie. "We'll have to execute the abandonment plan."

Amie nodded.

Wil turned to the others. "We'll get you out, but we have a few procedures to follow."

"Can we help?" Solace asked.

"Thanks for the offer, but we'll be done in exactly fifty seconds. We've timed it out."

Trever watched as Wil quickly touched the datascreen, turning off all heat and light in the house. Amie hurried to throw large dustcovers over the furniture.

"We hope to fool them," she told Trever. "They'll think the owners are away."

Wil shut down the house in just a few seconds. He hesitated for a moment. "I have to clear the computer files," he said. "We have to leave everything out in the open, so it appears we have nothing to hide." With a sigh, he pressed the key that wiped the information off the house computer. "The only thing that remains will be normal transactions."

The stormtroopers were at the next house. They would be here in less than a minute.

They hurried back down the ramp to the hangar. Instead of taking one of the speeders, however, Wil accessed a hidden panel in the wall. It slid back, and he waited as the others passed

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through. They were in a small tunnel. The floor sloped downward and then made a sharp turn.

"We'll come out on the street behind the house," Wil murmured. "When they break into our house, they'll find nothing."

"Won't the fake back wall make them suspicious?" Solace asked.

"Only if they find it. We just have to hope they won't get suspicious enough to check out the back."

They reached another blank wall. Wil waved his hand over a hidden sensor. The wall slid back and they quickly slipped out into the cold gray afternoon. They were in an alley that ran behind a small landing platform that was shared by the neighborhood. Wil gestured to them, and they followed him into the deserted hangar.

"We keep a vehicle here, just in case," he said. "I think it's a good idea to get out of this quadrant."

They were heading toward the vehicle when five stormtroopers suddenly entered. The leader's head turned. "ID docs," he ordered in his metallic voice.

"What should we do?" Amie murmured. "Bluff our way through?"

"If they find you with outsiders, it could compromise you," Oryon said.

"No talking allowed," rapped out the stormtrooper. The rest of the stormtroopers headed toward them.

"I can take care of this," Solace said.

"There's an entire squad," Amie said.

"Don't worry, she's not kidding," Trever said.

The stormtroopers raised their blasters.

Solace moved. She held out a hand and the Force slammed into the first two stormtroopers, knocking them backward. The remaining stormtroopers ran toward the group, but Solace was already moving, swinging her lightsaber in a clean arc that decapitated three with one blow. She kicked out with a foot,

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ducked, and turned in a complete circle and took out the leader and the remaining trooper.

Wil grinned. "You didn't tell us you were a Jedi."

Solace clipped her lightsaber back onto her utility belt. "You didn't ask."

"Let's get out of here," Amie said. "Another squad will show up before long."

They all squeezed into the speeder. "You should lay low for a while," Wil said, shooting out of the hangar and steering away from the house-to-house search. "When they find the stormtroopers, they'll put a lockdown on the city."

"Good advice, but we don't have time to lay low," Solace said. "Take us to the Imperial landing platform."

Chapter Five

Ferus had been in the city systems computer center for hours now. The room hummed with the intricate panels and datascreens, all controlled by a giant droid known as Platform-7. It was a variant of a BRT droid computer, big as a room, especially built to run Sath. Here, everything having to do with the city functions was tracked—space lanes, glowlamps, public fountains and parks, the power grid, the credit systems of all businesses. When the center had functioned smoothly, it had made living and working in Sath easy. Now that it was malfunctioning, it was almost impossible to trace where and how it had gone wrong.

Bog had stayed for only a short time, eager for Ferus to solve the problem. He'd become bored quickly and had left, with a hearty command to contact him as soon as he'd found the problem.

Ferus was no closer now to finding where the worm had originated than he had been when he arrived. He stared at the datascreens with their streaming code, his eyes burning. He had expected cleverness, but this was diabolical.

Usually, computer thieves couldn't help but leave fingerprints, little eccentricities of code that you could follow if you knew

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what to look for. Some led to dead ends, but eventually he was able to follow the code back to the source. Not this time.

Ferus pushed away from the console and closed his eyes. This was a matter the Force couldn't help him with. He had a feeling he was going about this the wrong way. He couldn't use any of his old methods. He had to think in a new way.

Motive. Why would somebody foul up an entire city?

The first thing he thought was that they would attempt to steal a large amount of credits from the City Bank, where all transactions were recorded and all wealth was deposited. But that area checked out. No attempts had been made. He wondered if a citizen had been trying to get out of paying the heavy taxes most Sathans paid in order to live in such a smoothly functioning society, where all of their needs were met. But if that were the case, there was no way to track it. Along with birth and death records, the tax rolls were a mess.

Maybe the culprits were trying to cover something up. Maybe it was revenge. Ferus spun around in his chair, trying to think. Without detailed knowledge of Sathan society, he couldn't begin to puzzle out emotional motives. He was reluctant to go that route until he had to. He'd rather attack the problem at its source.

Suddenly an idea made him bolt upright.

Ferus thought a moment, then typed in a span of dates, requesting city records for vehicle purchases.

Checking, the computer replied.

It didn't matter what the motive was. Whoever did this had to get off the planet. Ferus had a hunch. The Empire had shut down the spaceport in record time. What if the saboteur had intended to leave but was trapped on Sath?

If his luck was with him, the registration names would pop up. The random nature of the bug meant that some systems still worked, as long as no one checked them. He'd have a few seconds, that's all.

In minutes, a long list of names flashed up on the datascreen.

Jude Watson

Ferus hit the buttons to print it out, but in reply his screen read, *Sorry, unable*.

It was the same answer he'd been getting all morning. By this time, he was imagining he heard regret in the computer's bland, agreeable tone.

He'd have to memorize the names, and fast.

Bog stuck his head in the door. "Any progress?"

"No," Ferus replied shortly. He moved through the names, trying to memorize them. It was similar to a Temple exercise when he was a Padawan. But he feared his mind had been sharper when he was a boy. Distracted, he moved through the list again.

Bog walked in and read over his shoulder. "Vehicle Purchase Registration Request Records? What does this have to do with anything?"

The names began to slither and slide offscreen, a sure sign that even though he'd been able to access them, another part of the system was now breaking down. "Nothing, and everything," Ferus told Bog. "I have to check each component of the city records to see if I can find the hidden bug." The names suddenly disappeared and the screen went blank. Ferus hit a few keystrokes.

Citywide waste delivery system now malfunctioning, the screen advised.

Bog's face went bright red. "You're supposed to be fixing the system, not making it worse!"

Ferus shrugged. Bog stamped out. Ferus turned away from the coding chaos on his screen. He had the names in his head. Now all he had to do was cross-check them. But he couldn't do it here.

He jumped out of his seat and headed for the door, waving his hand over the sensor as he moved so that he jumped through the hissing doors as they opened, surprising a stormtrooper just outside.

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The stormtrooper snapped to attention. "I will contact Bog Divinian for you, sir. He just left. I can—"

"No need," Ferus said. "I'll be back."

He left the huge Sath Managing Complex and swung onto one of the main boulevards. Although Sath was a teeming city, he was now familiar with its layout. The main landing platform was less than a quarter kilometer away. He could sense a seeker droid behind him, no doubt tracking him, but he didn't care. There would be a time when he would ditch his surveillance, but it hadn't come yet.

He jumped onto the turbolift and hit the sensor for the landing platform. He strode out and found the same Sathan official in the Dockmaster Office. He was copying out names from the durasheets stacked on his desk.

"Leaving already? Don't blame you."

"I need some information. The day the saboteur struck," Ferus said. "When the Imperials closed the spaceport. How many were scheduled to depart?"

"Three hundred and twenty-seven," he said, without looking up.

"How many filed for a refund on the departure tax? Have you tabulated?"

"Almost all."

"May I see?"

The official hunted through the papers and handed a sheaf to Ferus. He quickly flipped through them. He immediately discovered the names of those who didn't file for a refund of the hefty departure tax.

The refund was a considerable amount of credits. Not many would turn down the chance to receive it.

He memorized the five names. One more stop and he'd be sure.

Thanking the official, he hurried back onto the turbolift. He took it down to the main level. There he hopped aboard a

Jude Watson

moving ramp that shot him forward. He could feel the presence of the seeker droid behind him.

Ferus took the ramp to the very center of the city. He exited and turned to the right, where a gleaming white structure loomed, long and low. This was the place where the Sathans mourned their dead. He walked inside.

The glowlamps were red and softly powered down, the air scented with herbs. The mausoleum wasn't staffed, but relied on huge datascreens for those who entered to find the name of their loved ones on the intricately carved, curving walls. By pressing the name, information about the loved one would appear and messages could be left.

The datascreens weren't working. But the names were arranged alphabetically, so Ferus was able to run down the curving walls, looking for a match to any of the five names he'd memorized. He found it in the Fs. There it was, Quintus Farel, just as he'd thought.

Quintus Farel had turned up in two places—on the list of those who had applied for a Vehicle Purchase Registration Request and on a list of those who never applied for a refund on the departure tax. If Quintus had bought a star cruiser and planned to leave, his plans had been foiled. But he hadn't bothered to get a refund.

All of this wasn't very interesting, except that Quintus Farel was dead.

He'd died twenty-five years ago at age two. A terrible speeder accident. His parents had died, too. Their names were beside him, here in the mausoleum.

Someone had stolen his name and ID information.

It was a common way to get an alias. Find a name that had already been recorded and it was easier to forge ID docs. A security number would have already been issued.

The saboteur had hit the personal records first—the birth and death records. They'd thought their tracks would be covered by the chaos that ensued. But by cross-referencing the landing

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platform records—which an overly zealous bureaucrat had painstakingly kept on durasheets, unbeknownst to the saboteur—with the mausoleum records that were kept engraved on synthstone, Ferus had found his first clue.

“Gotcha,” he murmured.

Before he left, he paused. The longer he let the seeker droid track him, the more information he’d be giving to Bog and the Empire. He wanted to find the saboteur himself, then decide what to do. He needed to make sure that he wasn’t handing over the planet to Imperial control. He had to hope that Solace and Oryon would be able to find Roan and Dona and free them before he had to make a choice.

He stepped out into the street again. He felt the seeker lurking underneath the curved roof of the building.

Suddenly a skyhopper zoomed down in front of him. “Air taxi, sir?”

It was Clive. Ferus stepped inside the vehicle. “I’ve got a seeker droid to lose,” he said.

“I’m way ahead of you, mate. You’ve been under droid surveillance since you left that crazy palace. Let’s lose the creep.”

Clive hit the engines hard. Ferus felt his stomach lurch as he moved up into space-lane traffic.

“Have to get past these canal bridges, then we can go up,” Clive said, swerving to avoid an airspeeder dodging an air taxi.

The space lane was clogged with traffic. Without signals, it was a free-for-all. Unfortunately, the citizens of Sath didn’t believe in slowing down.

Ferus was plastered against the seat. “This is insane.”

Clive cackled. “Isn’t it great?”

The seeker was keeping up. Clive suddenly swerved to the left, nearly colliding with a large airspeeder. “Oops, I keep forgetting about my lack of starboard visibility.” He tapped on the nav screen. “This keeps blitzing in and out.”

“Great.”

“Keep an eye out on starboard, will you?”

Jude Watson

Ferus glanced over his shoulder. "There's an airbus—"

Clive pushed the skyhopper violently to the right, passing underneath the bus by centimeters. "I saw it!" he said defensively when Ferus gave him an incredulous look.

"Watch out for the—"

"I've got it," Clive said, diving down almost to the surface. "Woo, this is fun!"

"The seeker—"

"Oh, right." Clive yanked the controls and zoomed down an alley. He looked up. "Got some room overhead—"

"There's not enough room!" Ferus saw only a tiny bit of sky between a cluster of towers overhead.

Clive hit the engines, and the skyhopper zoomed up several kilometers in an instant. They passed through the space between the buildings, so close that the skyhopper scraped against the building. The vehicle shuddered, but Clive only went faster. They seemed to pop out of the space like a cork. Ferus could swear he saw the paint peeling off the hull of the skyhopper.

Below them, the seeker crashed into the side of one of the towers. It flamed out and dropped.

"Told you there was room!" Clive chortled.

He zoomed even higher, until they were in the upper atmosphere.

"Where to, sir?" he asked.

"The Hundred Seventh district," Ferus answered. "And step on it."

"Music to my ears," Clive said.

Chapter Six

In an office in the Senate complex on Coruscant, a slender man clothed in black hit the control for his datapad. It rose from the center of his polished desk and he tilted the screen at the precise angle for viewing.

Senator Sano Sauro was impatient, but anyone peeking into his office would never know it. He sat composedly at his desk, his hands tightly folded in front of him. He hated to be kept waiting, and Bog Divinian was keeping him waiting. It was tiresome to have such a sloppy partner, but Bog had his uses.

He turned and looked at the artifact that hung suspended in a cube of transparisteel. He allowed himself to feel a surge of satisfaction at the battered object, a broken lightsaber hilt from a fallen Jedi. The Duro who sold it to him told him it had belonged to Mace Windu himself, but Sauro had no way to verify that. It just pleased him to imagine it.

He had hated the Jedi all his life. Their privilege, their arrogance. He'd brought one of them to trial—that odious boy, Obi-Wan Kenobi, who had later become such an important general. He was dead now, too.

And Sauro was alive. Older, but still in excellent shape, thanks to careful attention to his diet and visits to spas every six months. Not for him to accept the decrepitude of old human age.

Jude Watson

He was now one of the most powerful Senators in the Emperor's inner circle, a confidant and an advisor. They had formed their alliance years ago, after his attempted takeover of the Chancellor's position. Palpatine had called him into his office after the debacle, when so many Senators had been slaughtered. Sauro had planned just how to wiggle out of responsibility. He'd blamed the assassination attempt on Granta Omega, of course, a conspirator who had gone much farther than he claimed to have known. He had expected censure from the Chancellor, perhaps an arrest, though there was no hard evidence. Instead, Sauro had been offered a deputy position. It was clear, Palpatine had said, that Sauro knew the uses of power. He would give him a platform to exercise that gift.

And he had.

Behind the scenes, he had bribed, punished, flattered, and manipulated. Now he was the unseen power behind Palpatine. The Emperor had been hideously scarred after the assassination attempt by the Jedi Mace Windu, but Sauro did not underestimate him. His personal power had not diminished.

The problem was his new enforcer. Darth Vader had appeared out of nowhere. Sauro felt him like an electrojabber in his side. Vader was standing between him and the Emperor, and he couldn't have that.

Vader was consolidating his power, planet by planet, system by system. He was bringing governments in line. Already his name was spoken with fear.

Sauro didn't know where Vader had come from, but he knew he wasn't a politician. He didn't know how to maneuver his way through powerful blocs and strategic alliances. In the end, that would bring him down. He was just a thug.

Palpatine needed someone with elegance and subtlety. Someone like him.

Sauro believed in careful plotting. He didn't act in haste. He needed to outmaneuver Vader, but it would take time. It might take years. He would wait. If Vader was proving to be the

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Emperor's enforcer, Sauro would be the Emperor's strategist. Eventually he would demonstrate to Palpatine that he should be his second in command, not Vader.

The trick was to find out what he needed to do to impress Palpatine. He had to go above and beyond what he'd done in the past. He had to anticipate. Not answer the needs of yesterday, but the needs of tomorrow.

He was good at that.

His comlink signaled at last. The miniaturized hologram of Bog beamed onto his desk.

Bog bowed. "Everything is going according to plan, good friend."

"And what does that mean?" Sauro asked. Bog was always vague. He seemed to think that if he wasn't pinned down, he could be seen as marvelously efficient.

"The Jedi is under surveillance. The sensor tag adhered to his boot as he stepped forward to greet me, just as I'd planned. Unfortunately a seeker droid tracking him—because I believe in backup—met an unfortunate accident. Smashed into a building. The traffic in the space lanes is unruly because of this situation..."

"You idiot, it smashed into a building because the Jedi wanted it to," Sauro said. "It wasn't an accident. If you've got a sensor in his boot, what do you need a seeker for? He'll spot it no matter what it does. Just track him with the sensor. Where is he?"

"In the Hundred Seventh District. It's in the northwest area of the city—"

"I don't care where it is—I want to know if he's found anything!"

"Hard to know," Bog said.

"It's your job to know," Sauro said irritably. "Find out."

He cut the communication abruptly. He'd have to monitor Bog more closely. Sauro himself didn't get where he was today by underestimating a Jedi, even a failed Jedi like Ferus Olin.

Jude Watson

He swung his datapad closer. He tapped on the keys. He was taking no chances. He doubted that Ferus Olin was following the Emperor's orders without his own plan.

Sauro placed a secret code in his files. A neat booby trap. If someone tried unauthorized access, he'd know it immediately.

No one must be allowed to interfere with his plans.

Chapter Seven

Wil and Amie dropped Solace, Trever, and Oryon off on a bluff overlooking the Imperial hangar and adjacent landing platform. Due to the large number of vehicles and troops needed for the garrison, it had been built on the outskirts of Ussa, on an empty plain that stretched toward the foothills. Solace, Oryon, and Trever lay flat, watching the traffic below.

“If we can get to the holding pen for the airspeeder transports, we can go in that hangar door,” Solace said. “It’s not being used that much.”

To Trever, it looked as though it was being used every few minutes. Leave it to a Jedi to say something was easy when it was so clearly impossible.

Solace gave him one of her rare smiles. “I can see you doubt me.”

“I never argue with you or Ferus,” Trever said. “What’s the point?”

“Good philosophy.” Solace slipped her liquid cable out of her utility belt. “Ready?”

Oryon nodded. “I’ll take Trever.”

Great. The next thing Trever knew, he was hanging on to the strong broad back of Oryon and falling through thin air, the wind whistling past his ears. They landed on the ground with a

Jude Watson

bump. They were concealed here by boulders, and they quickly snaked through them until they were close to the hangar door.

Two stormtroopers were conferring near the entry. After a moment, they both turned to walk inside.

Now, Solace signaled.

She ran across the few meters of open ground. Trever followed, expecting at any moment to be blasted into oblivion. But they reached the safety of the wall. Solace peered around the corner into the interior of the hangar.

She signaled, and slipped inside. Trever followed. The hangar was connected to docking bays that ran the length of the structure. Arcs of durasteel rods held the plastoid retractable roof in place. They stood behind an equipment loader and scanned the space.

The place was mainly staffed by Class Five labor droids. Binary load lifters were busy with cargo. Freight droids moved smaller durasteel bins filled with weapons. Battle droids handled the security.

“This is why they won,” Oryon said. “Look at this place. They’re so efficient they can build this in no time at all.”

“They cut corners, though,” Solace said. “Antiquated docking system, no fuel lines to individual hangar bays.”

Oryon gazed overhead. “No automated fire protection.”

“Why bother? They can afford to lose droids and stormtroopers.”

“We need to get to a dataport,” Oryon said.

“It’s best if they don’t know we broke in,” Solace said. “I could take out the droids, but...”

“What we need is a diversion,” Trever said.

“Sure,” Oryon agreed. “But what?”

Trever glanced around the hangar. A group of labor droids was using a welding tool to fix a battered speeder. The sparks flew as they busily wheeled about. Next to them was a fuel storage bin and a parked gravsled. A power droid was nearby, its generator humming as it recharged several smaller freight droids.

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“Give me thirty seconds,” Trever said.

Ducking around speeders and ships for cover, he raced toward the droids. When he got within tossing distance of the fuel storage bins, he reached into his utility belt. Carefully modifying an alpha charge, he lobbed it toward the first bin. The tiny explosion was covered by the noise of the hangar.

The charge blew a small hole in the fuel container. The fuel began to dribble out. It formed a small stream that snaked toward the sparking tool. Trever backed up slowly, then dashed toward Solace and Oryon.

He felt the explosion at his back. It lifted him through the air and slammed him down on the permacrete. He felt his breath leave his body.

“Galactic,” he breathed. He rolled over and took cover.

Droids converged by the fire. With no automatic fire protection equipment or hoses, they had to scuttle back and forth between the fire stations and the blaze. The labor droids turned to monitor the situation, but the confusion overwhelmed them.

Oryon was already moving, leaping toward the dataport. Solace moved to guard him in case he was spotted. Trever decided to stay where he was. He watched Oryon’s fingers fly over the datakeys.

Something alerted him, a flicker at the corner of his vision. It was a security droid, trying to get a fix on his position. Trever reached for a charge in his belt, but Solace had already seen the droid. She leaped up to slash it in two with her lightsaber.

And just like that, they were spotted.

Security droids wheeled and advanced, firing at them. Oryon raced from the dataport, Solace covering his retreat with her lightsaber. She moved like wind and water, with no trace of effort. Her lightsaber was a revolving circle of light. Trever waited, knowing that Oryon and Solace would come for him.

Jude Watson

They did, running quickly, Oryon's blaster firing, Solace's lightsaber arcing and moving. Trever tossed a few half alpha-charges and then ran.

Solace motioned to them and they charged into a small shuttle. Oryon jumped behind the controls. Trever leaped for the laser cannon. He blasted away at the droids as Oryon fired up the engines and they zoomed out of the hangar and shot up into the atmosphere. In moments, the landing platform was a spot on the surface of the planet. A thin trail of gray smoke marked where the fire was.

"So much for not attracting attention," Oryon said.

"Can't be helped," Solace answered. "Did you get any information?"

"Not enough," Oryon said. "The ship's location is coded, and I didn't have enough time to break it. I did learn something interesting, though—the ship is the pet project of a Senator named Sano Sauro. There's a direct comlinkage between his office and the vehicle."

"Never heard of him," Solace said. "I stay away from Senate politics."

"He's in the Emperor's inner circle," Oryon said. "A nasty piece of work. Maybe Keets and Curran can help us from their end."

"I'll send them the information," Solace said, taking out her comlink.

"Sorry I couldn't get more," Oryon said.

Trever looked around the cabin. "No sweat. At least we got a nice ship."

"There's nothing more we can do at the moment," Solace said. "We'll have to play hide-and-seek with the Empire for a while. We'll see what Curran and Keets can come up with."

Chapter Eight

The atmosphere at Dex's hideout was tense. Dexter Jettster had finally left Curran and Keets alone in the study, unable to put up with their bickering. They were going through information sheets on any link between Samaria and either the Senate or the Empire, and it was rough going. There was plenty of information to study, but no links that stood out. The search was wearing on both Keets's and Curran's nerves. They both needed to be doing something, and this felt like a waste of time.

After Solace finished her brief request, Curran shut off the comlink. He fixed Keets with his sharp, penetrating gaze. His nose twitched.

"What did I do now?" Keets threw a wadded-up paper from a muja muffin on top of the pile of durasheets on his table. He brushed the crumbs off his tunic.

"We almost missed that communication. The comlink should be available at all times."

"I handed it to you!"

"After a search. You lost it under that pile."

"True. But I found it again. You never give me enough credit." Keets grinned at Curran. "You want the rest of my muffin?"

Jude Watson

"I don't...want...the rest of your muffin." Curran articulated each word. "I want you to be responsible."

"I keep telling you, don't say that word while I'm in the room. What did they say?" Keets asked.

Curran sighed. He sat down carefully in a chair after brushing off some crumbs. "They couldn't locate the ship, but they did discover an interesting connection. Sano Sauro is in comlink touch with the ship."

Keets whistled. "That *is* interesting. It's our Bog Divinian link. He's a protégé of Sauro's. Do you think they're cooking up something on Samaria?"

"No doubt. If we can find out what, we might be able to help Ferus and get some crucial information to Solace and Oryon as well."

Keets looked at his messy table. "I knew there was a reason I was going through these senatorial records. Every time Divinian, that pompous son of a bantha, makes a move, Sauro is somewhere in the background."

"Sauro plucked him out of obscurity and brought him back to the government," Curran said. He smoothed the fur on his cheeks with his hands, a gesture he made when he was thinking hard. "He's risen fast. But Divinian is nothing more than a hack. Why would Sauro need a hack?"

Keets gestured at the pile of durasheets, sending half of them shooting off the table. "Bantha Bog isn't his only hack. He's got plenty more." Keets thought a moment as he gazed at the pile on the floor. "At first I thought Sauro just didn't have good judgment. His protégés are the emptiest heads you've ever seen. Find a being, male or female, who's been raised with wealth and hasn't done a thing with it, shove them into positions of power..."

"And then control their every move," Curran said. "You're really the one with the power, not them."

"He's personally handpicked Imperial advisors to at least ten planets in the Core that I know about," Keets said.

“But how does this help us with Samaria?”

“It doesn’t...yet,” Keets said. “But it’s brilliant, if you go in for that evil mastermind sort of thing. Sauro has managed to ingratiate himself into Palpatine’s inner circle. Now he’s consolidating his power outside of it. I’d bet he’s going to butt heads—or should I say helmet—with Vader eventually.”

Dexter Jettster stuck his big head in the room. Two of his hands gestured at them. “Have you two stopped going at each other like a pair of nek battle dogs or have you found something?”

“Just a plot to take over the galaxy,” Keets said.

Curran blew out a short breath, ruffling his facial fur. “Sano Sauro is handpicking Imperial advisors and sending them to strategic planets in the Core Worlds. He’s also set up a ship called the *True Justice*, a kind of traveling courtroom for political prisoners. That’s where Roan and Dona are being held.”

“Good—finding them is the first step.” Dex stroked his chin with one of his four hands. “Setting up a system to try political prisoners is a smart move. That would give him access to any information on resistance movements.”

“And he’s a special advisor to the new academy where they’re starting to train pilots and officers,” Keets said. “He’s got a finger in a lot of nasty Imperial pies.”

“In another few years, he’ll have planetary rulers and officers loyal to him, as well as all the Senators he has in his pocket,” Curran said.

“The question is, does Palpatine know what he’s up to?” Keets asked.

“Might know, might not care,” Dex said shrewdly. “He’ll let Vader handle Sauro if he has to get rid of him. In the meantime, he’s helping the Empire. But how does this help our friends?”

“We know he’s in constant communication with the *True Justice*,” Keets said. “So at least we can send the coordinates to Solace.”

Jude Watson

“Break into his files at the Senate?” Dex asked. “The two of you are well known there. You got away with it once, but sneaking into a senatorial office will be harder. Zackery is still in charge of security.”

“Zackery! My old friend,” Keets said. “We had many a tussle when I was a reporter. I got thrown out of the Senate building by him more times than I can count.”

“He’s nothing to laugh at,” Dex advised, with a frown. “More power has just made him meaner. This is a dangerous game, my friends.”

“The only kind to play,” Keets replied.

Chapter Nine

Most of the population of Sath lived in tall high-rises, some luxurious, some not. The building Ferus was looking for fell somewhere in the middle range. It was built overlooking a canal, and a large landing platform crowned a hangar nearby.

“Decent place, but what are we doing here?” Clive asked as they zoomed up in the turbolift.

“All vehicles applying for departure must register an address with the landing platform,” Ferus answered.

“So you think the person using Quintus Farel’s identity is here?”

“No. I think whoever sold him the cruiser is here. I think he was able to use the address of the former owner because it hadn’t been changed in the system yet.”

“I never realized what a mind for details you had, Ferus.”

“It’s an old skill.”

“Must have made you popular.”

“It made me a bore.”

Ferus pushed the door alert button to an apartment on the fiftieth floor. He stood in front of the security screen. In a moment a voice squawked out of the speaker next to it.

“What is it?”

Jude Watson

"I'm here to ask you a few questions about a star cruiser you sold several weeks ago," Ferus said.

"If there are any problems with it, they aren't mine," the voice snarled. "When I sold it, it was in top condition."

"No, no problems. Can you open the door? It would be easier to talk face-to-face."

A hesitation, then the door slid open. A young woman stood before them, her shimmersilk dressing gown knotted tightly around her waist. She looked Ferus and Clive up and down. "Okay, here's my face. What is it?"

"I have some questions about the person you sold the cruiser to. Quintus Farel."

"So ask. Do I look like I have all day for this?"

"Did you meet Quintus Farel?"

"You're not from Sath, are you? Who meets anybody in this city? I placed an electronic advert, this Quintus answered it, we exchanged details, I got credits in my accounts, Quintus got the ship. I bought it for some romantic space travel, but my boyfriend took off, the dinko. Anyway, who wants to travel in this galaxy now? Stormtroopers, everywhere I look."

"Did you ever speak directly to Quintus?"

"Once. I parked the cruiser in the wrong space by mistake, so he couldn't find it. I forgot to move it. Sue me. So I got a comlink call from Quintus, I think he was afraid I was going to cheat him. It wasn't my fault, my neighbor parked in my space, the monkey lizard."

Suddenly Ferus had an idea. "Are you sure Quintus was male?"

She shrugged. "Deep voice, and it sounded electronically altered. Mr. Secrecy. All I cared about was the transfer of credits into my account."

Ferus wasn't getting much information out of the woman. Clive gave Ferus a look that said, *Let me take over*. He put one hand on the door frame and smiled down at her. "I can see you

pay attention to things. Did Quintus mention where he was going?”

The woman rolled her eyes. “Why would he do that? And why would I care? Get your hand off my door.”

Clive straightened, no longer trying to work his charm. “How long is the range of your ship?”

“No hyperdrive, if that’s what you’re asking. But it was fast. I like to go fast. Are we done?”

Ferus sighed. “Thank you for your time.”

Discouraged, he and Clive turned and started back toward the turbolift.

“Was that the rudest woman in the galaxy, or am I crazy?” Clive muttered under his breath.

“You’re not crazy.”

Then they heard her call them. “Fellas?”

They turned back.

“Just thought of one thing,” the woman said. “The comlink communication came from the Fountain Towers.”

“How do you know?”

“Well, the blocking mechanism was on, so an address didn’t pop up. But the Fountain Towers complex is new. Nice place, wish I could live there, but I’m stuck in this hole. It surrounds the Seven Minerals Fountain, in the Three Hundredth district.”

“But if the address was blocked—”

“I’m not finished. The Seven Minerals Fountain has a chord clock—every half hour, it strikes the first three chords of the Samarian anthem. I heard that. So I’m guessing Quintus lives in the Fountain Towers. Because he was pretty annoyed at me and said he had to go all the way home again without the ship.”

“I could kiss you,” Clive told the woman.

“Not tempting,” she said, shutting the door.

Ferus pressed the turbolift sensor. “What now?” Clive asked. “If this Fountain Towers place is anything like every other building in Sath, it’s got hundreds of apartments.”

Jude Watson

"And a hangar next door, if we're lucky. A space cruiser will be parked in a numbered space," Ferus said. "We have him."

The turbolift whooshed downward, stopping every once in a while to pick up more passengers. As it descended to the lobby, and the passengers disembarked, Ferus put his hand on Clive's arm to slow him down before he exited behind them.

"What is it?" Clive asked when the passengers had exited.

"I have a funny feeling about this," Ferus said.

"That Force of yours?"

Ferus nodded. "We're being followed. I'm sure of it."

"We lost the seeker droid." Clive took a few steps into the lobby. The floor-to-ceiling glass windows afforded a view of canal and street and sky. "Nobody out there that I can see...."

Ferus walked forward cautiously. Then he stopped. He raised one foot, then the other. He ran his boot along the stone floor and heard a slight clicking noise. "A sensor tag," he said. "It's on the sole of my boot."

Clive squatted down. "Clever." He straightened. "But we're cleverer."

"That's not a word."

"Sure it is. Come on."

They walked out of the building. They hesitated, watching the passing air traffic.

"That one," Clive said, pointing to a shining chromium speeder that was barreling down the space lane, cutting off other vehicles as it swerved.

"Just what I was thinking."

Ferus Force-leaped up to the canopy that overhung the ten-story lobby. He hesitated, balancing on the edge. As the speeder approached, he plucked the sensor off his boot and sent it spinning. It connected to the rear of the speeder. In a moment, the speeder had disappeared around a bend.

Ferus jumped back to the ground, doing a somersault on the way down.

"Show-off," Clive said.

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“Come on,” Ferus said. “I’d guess we have about an hour before Bog figures it out. Well, knowing Bog, we might have more than that.”

Quickly they headed to the skyhopper and took off. They stayed in the space lanes for the short trip, and Ferus had another hair-raising ride. He was happy to see the Fountain Towers rising against the cityscape.

The towers were built on the edge of the city, far from the wide aquamarine bay. There were four slender towers, and each had an adjoining hangar that was almost as tall. The hangars contained open-air landing platforms every twenty stories. Three of the towers were completed, and one was half built, its hangar just a shell. The upper levels of the building were full of scaffolding and exposed beams.

They landed near the fountains, which were now dry. Clive zoomed into the first hangar and parked the skyhopper. They began the tedious process of tracking the registry numbers of the vehicles.

At last, they found the vehicle on level fifty-eight. Ferus peered inside the cockpit.

“Clive, look at this,” he called.

Clive pressed his face against the cockpit bubble. “Wow, a control panel. What a surprise.”

“No, in the passenger seat.”

Clive looked again. “It’s a laser lasso.”

“A toy.” Ferus frowned. “I didn’t think there would be a child involved.” Ferus had a bad taste in his mouth.

Something didn’t feel right. It hadn’t felt right since he’d stepped foot on this planet. He was being manipulated. He was sure of it. But why? Why had Palpatine chosen him for this mission? Ferus had a pretty good idea of his own skills, but he knew he wasn’t the only being in the galaxy who could help with this problem.

The closer he got to finding the saboteur, the more uneasy he became.

Jude Watson

“Maybe this isn’t the ship,” Clive said.

“No, this is it,” Ferus said. “I feel it. And look—there’s some mud rubbed on the registry numbers to try to obscure them. It’s an old trick, but it works.”

Ferus gazed over at the apartment tower, thinking. He knew that Solace would contact him as soon as she’d rescued Roan and Dona. Until then, he would have to keep going, keep following one step after another until he found the saboteur. Whether he handed the saboteur over to the Imperials or not was another question—one he hoped he wouldn’t have to answer.

Chapter Ten

Even in the middle of the night, the Senate never shut down completely. As Keets and Curran made their way down the hushed hallways, they passed cleaning crews who didn't give them a glance, bleary-eyed senatorial aides hunched over their cups of strong tea, and Senators, resplendent in their opera cloaks, stopping by after an evening out to pick up records for the next day.

But Sano Sauro's office was dark.

Keets used a nifty device Dex had loaned him. It fit into the palm of his hand, making it unnoticeable as he pressed it against the sensor panel. With a few beeps, the device broke the code, and the door slid open.

"Sure wish I had this when my landlord kept locking me out of my apartment," Keets said as he slipped it into his pocket.

"Why did he do that?"

Keets stepped through the doorway. "Oh, a little thing called *failure to pay rent*. Landlords are touchy creatures."

They slipped like shadows into Sauro's inner office.

"He's a tidy fellow," Keets said, looking around. "I don't trust anyone this neat."

"I'm not interested in his character at the moment," Curran said, crossing to the desk. "Just his files."

Jude Watson

Keets followed at a more leisurely pace, as he checked out Sauro's spare collection of items, the curved horns the color of blood, rising from the edges of his desk. "Old habit, my friend. Investigative journalist. Sometimes I'd learn more from what was in someone's office than what was in his files. Like this." Keets paused before what looked like a sculpture, the only decorative object in the room. It was a metal object with a crack down the middle, suspended by a small repulsorlift motor in a clear transparisteel cube.

"What is it?" Curran asked as he searched for the dataport release button.

"A lightsaber hilt." Keets circled it slowly. "He hates the Jedi. He keeps the symbol of their defeat in his office, right in front of his eyes, so he can see it every day."

Curran found the release. A datascreen rose from the middle of the desk. He quickly ran through the files. "Coded."

"Naturally. Allow me." Keets slid into the chair and tapped at the keyboard. "I'm in."

"That was fast."

"It's all in the wrist." Keets expertly keyed in a phrase. "I'm going to search any files that were recently opened....Whoa, what's this?"

"What's what?"

"A memo Sauro sent to Palpatine. Blah blah, your excellency, your Imperialness, the usual...but here. He promises results on Samaria. *Personally responsible for results,*' he says...blah, more drivel, and—wait. Here. He says, *'and there will be news of a deep interest of yours that has long coincided with mine.'* What could that mean?"

"I don't know," Curran said. "But let's concentrate on the *True Justice*."

Keets returned to searching through files. "Here we go." He converted a file to holographic mode and sent it into the air.

Together they leaned closer to scan it. It was a complete record of the *True Justice*, complete with schematics.

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"We need a ship's log for coordinates," Curran said anxiously.

"Not a problem—we'll find it," Keets muttered. "Wait. Something's wrong. I've tripped something."

"What?"

"A security code. Here—see that shimmer on the indicator light? Some models of this dataport display that if it's been booby-trapped. It's supposed to be a silent alarm, but if you know where to look..." Keets glanced up at Curran. "We'll get caught."

"Yes."

They exchanged a quick look that confirmed what they had both decided. This information was vital. If they were caught, so be it.

Keets continued to flip through the file, moving even more rapidly now. "Here it is."

Curran moved to the door. "I hear them."

"I'll transmit the entire file to Solace." Keets keyed in the coordinates. "First I have to copy it. If I send it from Sauro's computer, they'll be able to track her."

"They're close."

"Almost done."

Keets watched the streaming file. Every second counted.

"They're in the outer office!"

Keets saw the blinking *FILE COPIED*.

The door slipped open and Senate security poured in, Imperial guards led by one short, burly human man.

"Well, hey there, Zackery. Long time, no—"

"Keets." The man pointed a blaster. "Breaking into a Senator's office again, are you?"

"Keeps them honest." Behind his back, Keets's fingers were working frantically, keying in Solace's comlink access. He pressed the comlink and sent the file.

"I'm going to enjoy handing you over to the Empire."

"Anything that makes you happy," Keets said. He glanced at Curran, giving him a look that told him the transfer had been

Jude Watson

successful. It didn't matter what happened to them now. They'd won this round.

Chapter Eleven

“They did it,” Oryon said. He stared at the dataport on the Imperial ship. “They’ve given us coordinates, scheduled stops, even a schematic. I’m going to stop underestimating Keets right now. I’d better send back a thank you.”

“Don’t,” Solace said. “Look at the last code. It’s our emergency signal. They were captured.”

Oryon, Solace, and Trever stared at each other. “What should we do?” Trever asked.

“Our duty,” Solace said. “We get to the ship and release Roan and Dona.”

Oryon took a deep breath. He walked over to the pilot’s ship and entered the coordinates. “They’re close to Bellassa,” he said. “It shouldn’t take us long. But we have a couple of problems.”

Solace nodded. “How to board, for one.”

“And we’re on a stolen Imperial ship,” Trever said. “They’re probably looking for us.”

“Don’t forget I was a spy,” Oryon said. “I can program the shipboard computer to randomly change our registry number every few minutes. They’ll never get a fix on us. Eventually they’ll figure it out, but we just need a little time.”

“Good,” Solace said. “Now we have to plan our boarding.”

Jude Watson

She bent over the files again, quickly scanning the information.

"It could work," she murmured. She looked over her shoulder at Oryon and Trever. "We have to take the chance."

"What chance?" Trever asked. When Solace looked at him like that, he began to feel nervous. The look said, *Are you up for this?*

"There's an Imperial judicial team—an attorney, a judge, and a law clerk—scheduled to board at the Penumbra Spaceport," Solace said. "They're to conduct the trial of Roan and Dona. If we went directly to the ship, we could fly right into the cargo hold. We could pose as the team and get aboard."

"Wouldn't the real team contact the ship when the ship never showed up for them?" Oryon asked.

"We'd have a couple of hours. We could free Roan and Dona and control the ship," Solace said. "This idea is so new that Roan and Dona are the only prisoners. It's mostly staffed by droids."

"Yeah, a new model of security droids," Trever pointed out. "The ones with dual laser cannons."

"Not so easy," Oryon said.

"I didn't say it was easy," Solace said. "But it's our only chance."

Trever stirred nervously as Solace guided the ship to a landing hangar inside the Imperial ship. He had no idea what a law clerk actually did, or how a law clerk would speak or act. He had no doubt that a law clerk would be smarter than he was. Maybe it would be a good idea to keep his mouth shut.

Oryon spoke to him in a soft voice. "The trick is to believe you are what you say you are."

"That's some trick."

Solace activated the ramp and turned to them. "Just follow my lead," she said.

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They walked down the ramp. An Imperial officer waited for them.

Solace nodded at him shortly. "I am Judge Bellican. This is Attorney Tomay Alcorn and clerk Sam Weller."

"First Officer Dicken. Follow me."

The officer led them to the cockpit. The captain sat in the control post. He stood as they came in and Officer Dicken introduced them. "We understood that you'd meet us at the spaceport," Captain Tran said.

"Change in plan," Solace said. "There are compelling reasons to speed up the trial."

"I'd like to see the prisoners," Oryon said.

"They're in lockdown. The trial will begin in five minutes."

"That does not give me enough time to prepare a case—" Oryon said. The plan had been for them to release Roan and Dona as soon as they could.

He was interrupted by the captain, who gave him a sharp glance. "But these are standing orders for the ship. All prisoners will be tried immediately upon the arrival of the legal team. The point of this new system is speed and efficiency. I understand you've already prepared the case."

"Of course, but there are always last-minute details...."

"I was fully briefed by Senator Sauro. I expect you were as well."

"Yes," Solace said quickly.

"Then a droid will see you to the courtroom. First Officer Dicken and I will act as witnesses for the official record."

There was nothing to do but nod. Solace and the others left the cockpit and followed a protocol droid into the hallway.

"What are we going to do?" Trever hissed.

"Exactly what we're supposed to," Solace said. "We're going to try Roan and Dona."

Chapter Twelve

The courtroom was a small conference room with no chairs for spectators. Why would there be? The trials were designed to be conducted in secret, with the prisoners escorted as quickly as possible to prison. Stormtroopers and security droids were lined up against one wall, no doubt to keep any possible agitation from turning into violence.

Solace sat in the judge's chair, on a slightly raised platform at one end of the room. She quickly familiarized herself with the controls. "I have the capability to activate the droids," she whispered to the others. "That should come in handy."

Two tables faced the judge, and Trever and Oryon took their places at one of them.

Captain Tran and First Officer Dicken hurried in, followed by a law droid, who took its place at the other table.

The captain and the first officer stood at the back. Obviously they didn't think this would take long.

"Let's hurry this along," the captain said. "We've got to finish this and make it to the Nunce system to pick up a load of prisoners. My job is to fill up the ship, and the sooner I do it, the sooner I get a better commission."

Roan and Dona were led into the courtroom by guard droids. Trever looked at them carefully for signs of mistreatment. Dona

looked thin and tired, but Roan walked in, his head high. He saw Trever and gave a small start, not visible to the officers. Then his face was impassive again.

"This trial will come to order," Solace said, hitting an electronic gavel that emitted a soft *bong*.

Roan and Dona sat at the table with the law droid.

"Roan Lands and Dona Telamark, you have been accused of conspiracy against the government of Bellassa and plotting to assassinate the Imperial advisor to the government of Bellassa. How do you plead?"

"Guilty," the droid said.

"Wait a minute," Roan said. "This hunk of junk doesn't speak for us. We requested a lawyer."

"I am a court-appointed attorney, sir," the law droid said, swiveling its head.

"This is outrageous. Under rules of the Galactic Senate, we have the right to choose our own counsel."

"I must correct you, sir," the droid said. "The Emperor has suspended that right in Senate Act three-two-one, point seven, when it comes to traitors of the Galactic Empire."

"But I haven't yet been proven a traitor of the Empire," Roan pointed out.

"Yes, but we have the right to try you as one."

"If you are, indeed, my attorney, then I have the right to fire you," Roan said. "I'll handle our case."

The droid's head swiveled faster, its sensors flashing. "There is no precedent for this. I must do a more extensive search of my memory banks."

"Don't bother," Solace said. "The accused has a point. I recognize his right to fire you."

The law droid's sensors blinked frantically. "Objection!"

"On what grounds?"

"On the grounds that it violates the procedural microchip!"

"Overruled. Let us proceed."

"What's going on here?" Captain Tran asked.

Jude Watson

"I'm sorry, Captain, you are a witness to this proceeding, not a participant," Solace said. "I accept Roan Lands as attorney. How do you plead?"

"Not guilty."

"Let's get this show into the space lane," the captain muttered. "I have things to do."

Solace nodded to Roan. "Proceed with the prosecution."

Roan stood. "Before we begin, I make the motion to dismiss the case, your honor. This case was built on illegal surveillance. Under the rules of the Bellassan Senate, an order from a security court judge must be obtained. This was never done."

The droid's sensors blinked. "Objection! The Emperor has suspended the need to obtain an order to run surveillance on any citizen of any world in the galaxy for any reason."

"True," said Solace. "But the Galactic Senate has not ratified the decision."

"But it hasn't been asked to consider it," the droid protested. "The Emperor doesn't need permission."

"Nevertheless, I feel this is a gray area," Solace countered.

"This is contrary to the information in my pro-cedural memory banks," the droid said. "Highly irregular...overheating circuits. I must be repaired immediately!" It quickly bolted from the room.

Captain Tran stamped his foot. "Gray area!" he exclaimed, exasperated. "There are no gray areas in the Galactic Empire! The Emperor has done away with gray areas! That was the problem with the Republic!"

"May I remind you to keep quiet, Captain?" Solace asked. "Political speeches are out of order in the courtroom."

Oryon stood. "We recognize the prisoner's legal point. Upon careful review of the case, your honor, I respectfully submit that the charges against the accused be dropped."

"This is outrageous!" the captain blustered.

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"I am the judge," Solace said. She hit the gavel gong. "Case dismissed! Furthermore, I charge you, Captain Tran, and your first officer Dicken with obstruction of justice—and mutiny."

"Mutiny!"

"Mutiny, sir, for interfering with an Imperial court case." Solace pressed the security droid button. She pointed to the stormtroopers. "Take them to lockdown."

The captain reached for his blaster, but Oryon was there in less than a moment. He pressed his own blaster against the captain's temple. "I'd rethink what you were about to do."

"But you have no right!"

"When we walked on board, we gained that right. We represent justice in the Empire," Solace answered. "Surrender your weapons."

Captain Tran and First Officer Dicken handed over their blasters to Oryon.

The security droids and stormtroopers began to march them from the courtroom. "You'll be hearing about this," the captain said to Solace and the group. "You're all going to wind up in an Imperial prison!"

"Looks like that's where you're headed!" Trever called.

As soon as they were out of the room, Dona slumped at the table in relief, but Roan laughed. "Thanks for the save."

"We're not safe yet," Solace said, leaping to her feet and taking off her judicial robe. "We're going to have to take the ship."

"Let's go," Roan said. "Anybody have a blaster?"

Oryon tossed him one of the three blasters.

Dona stood. Color had flooded her face, bringing her strength and vitality back. "Who are you people?"

"Wait, let me guess. Friends of Ferus?" Roan asked.

"Good friends," Oryon said. "I am Oryon, and this is Solace. You already know Trever. Ferus is safe, but we'll tell you about him later."

Jude Watson

"I'm willing to take over an Imperial cruiser," Roan said. "No problem. But aren't we about to meet a bunch of enraged droids? And we're only five?"

"And one of us is a bad shot," Dona put in.

"We got the schematics of the ship," Solace said. "It runs with a light crew. Most of the droids are kept in the hold. They're only there in case of attack. If we can take control of the cockpit, we can lock down the hold."

"How many will be in the cockpit?"

"About three officers and twenty droids," Solace said. "It won't be a problem."

"Did she just say it's not a problem?" Roan turned to Oryon.

"Trust me," Solace said.

They strode out into the hallway. Solace took the lead.

They hadn't gone very far before a protocol droid met up with them. "Crew awaiting captain's orders," it said.

"The captain has been arrested," Solace said. "I am in charge."

"That's a violation of authority," the droid said. "I'll have to summon—"

In a flash, Solace moved forward, lightsaber in hand, and sliced his head off.

"Oh, dear," the disembodied head said.

With an expert slice, Solace disabled its control panel even as she continued to race down the hall.

"Ah, now I get it," Roan said. "Ferus found his Jedi."

They raced down the hallway, following Solace to the cockpit. Trever was impressed at how quickly Roan integrated himself in the group. He moved to Solace's right, letting Oryon cover her left. Dona stayed behind with Trever. The five of them weren't exactly an elite attack group, but Trever had no doubt they would win.

Solace activated the doors of the cockpit and charged in, lightsaber in hand. The new security droids began to fire their

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laser cannons, raising their forearms. Fire pinged through the cockpit in streaks of energy. Trever dropped and rolled.

In less than a minute, Solace had sliced through three droids and somersaulted in the air to knock down another before burying her lightsaber in its control panel. Then she reversed to take down four droids standing guard. Oryon and Roan took care of the rest.

The cockpit was now filled with smoking droids and fused metal, and Solace had her lightsaber pointed at the chest of the officer in charge. “You don’t want to push me, do you?” she asked. She wasn’t even breathing hard.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“We’ll give you safe passage to a spaceport. All crew must depart. We’ll leave you with your lives if you leave us with the ship.”

The officer shared a glance with his crew. “I’m not dying for this ship. I agree.”

Oryon sprang to the controls. Roan held his blaster on the three Imperial officers as he settled into a chair and crossed his legs. “I’m going to enjoy this ride,” he said.

Chapter Thirteen

Keets and Curran sat in the Senate retaining room, where those who violated security were kept. They were relieved they hadn't immediately been shipped off to an Imperial detention center.

Zackery sat at a table, watching a broadcast of a gladiator droid contest on his datascreen, ignoring the prisoners. Keets considered whether to overpower him, but he knew there was additional security behind the closed door. They were waiting for something, and he had a feeling he knew what it was.

The doors hissed open, and Sano Sauro appeared. Despite the fact that it was the middle of the night, he was dressed and groomed impeccably.

Zackery sprang to his feet. "Here they are, sir. We caught them red-handed in your office."

"Leave us."

"But they could be dangerous...."

"I hardly think so." Sauro plucked a piece of lint off his black sleeve. "Go."

Zackery left hurriedly, tucking his datapad under his arm.

Sauro seated himself at the table and folded his hands. "Who are you working for?" he asked.

"No one," Curran said.

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“Don’t waste my time. Either you tell me or I hand you over to Imperial interrogators. From what I understand, you,” Sauro said, turning to Keets, “were a third-rate journalist, and you,” he continued, turning to Curran, “were a low-level Senate aide until the Empire was established, after which it was determined that you both had violated the laws of the Empire, and warrants were issued for your arrests.”

“Third-rate?” Keets reared back. “You can torture me all you want, but there’s no need to call me *third-rate*.”

Sauro’s gaze was dark and neutral. “I have enemies,” he said. “I accept that as an inevitable part of power. It is necessary for me to know who they are. Now, you will either tell me or you will be forced to talk by an Imperial interrogator. *Who hired you?*”

“Bog Divinian,” Curran said. He didn’t think it was possible to surprise Sano Sauro, but he saw the flicker in his gaze.

“You’re lying,” the Senator challenged.

Curran didn’t answer. It was enough to have planted the suspicion in Sauro’s mind. Better to keep Bog and Sauro off balance and not trusting each other.

“I don’t have time for lies,” Sauro said, rising smoothly, “so I—”

The door hissed open behind him. Sauro didn’t turn, but they saw his anger at being interrupted.

“I didn’t summon you.”

Zackery took a hesitant step into the room. “Urgent communication for you, sir. The *True Justice* has been hijacked.”

“You fool, tell me outside!” Sauro’s face was white.

Keets kept his face impassive, but he could have cheered at the look of fury on Sauro’s face. The guy was panicking, that was for sure.

And he had no doubt that Solace and Oryon and Trever had done the impossible: They had freed Roan and Dona.

“Do not tell anyone this news,” Sauro hissed at Zackery. “It must not reach the Emperor.” He turned back and looked at

Jude Watson

Keets and Curran with hatred. "I'll deal with them later," he said. Then he hurried out the door.

Chapter Fourteen

Darth Vader was used to being called to Palpatine's office at any hour, so he was not surprised at the summons that called him there in the predawn hours. He didn't need much sleep now. If not for the demands of what was left of his body, he wouldn't sleep at all. Sleep brought dreams.

He found his Master standing at the window overlooking the lights of Coruscant. It was where he plotted his strategy. They had done so much, but power gained must still be consolidated. How thrilling it would be at last to hold the galaxy firm in a fist, to know that because of his efforts it would run smoothly, without the petty systemwide wars that had plagued it in the past, without the inefficiency of many voices clamoring for different things.

"Things are not going well on Samaria," the Emperor said without preliminaries. "I haven't troubled you about it because it seemed a minor problem. Yet Samaria is necessary for us, a strategic link to the rest of the Core."

"I am not surprised, my Master," Vader said. "I did not understand why Divinian was put in charge."

"There are reasons to keep him occupied," Palpatine said.

"Sano Sauro."

Jude Watson

"That is one reason. Sauro is useful. He is trying hard to please me. He sent me a secret memo about the Academy."

Vader waited. Sauro was not a problem, not yet. He knew well that Sauro would plot against him. Sauro was more annoying than threatening.

"He has an idea," the Emperor said. "It's about Force-sensitive children."

Vader grew alert.

"We have eliminated the traitorous Jedi, but not the Force-sensitive. Sauro claims he is the only one in the galaxy who has the ability to discover a Force connection in children." Palpatine gave a mocking smile. "Can you imagine the arrogance? He had a protégé, long ago—a fallen Jedi named Xanatos."

"He was once the apprentice of Qui-Gon Jinn. He turned to the dark side."

"I knew of him, but he was not my apprentice. Sauro said that Xanatos told him many secrets of the Jedi. He knows about midi-chlorians."

Vader was keeping his anger in check. "He inflates his importance."

"No doubt. But he thinks this will please me. He doesn't know that he is dealing with a Sith. It's quite amusing to listen to him."

"What does he want?"

"To bring Force-sensitive children to the Academy," Palpatine responded. "He believes that the Force can be used to train pilots. Reflexes, instincts. He thinks in ten years we could develop an invincible fleet."

"He doesn't understand the Force," Vader said. "You can't train children to develop the Force as *pilots*." He spit out the last word in disdain.

"This, from a former Podracer?"

Vader didn't move. He knew his Master brought up his childhood from time to time to test him, to prod the place that was most painful.

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"Of course you are right," Palpatine said. "But I am going to let him have his little idea—for now."

Vader knew better than to disagree with his Master, but he had to make his objection. This news troubled him. He did not want other Force-connected beings to be gathered together. Order 66 had eliminated the Jedi. He thought they were gone forever.

"It is a waste of time," his electronically-enhanced voice said.

His Master turned to him then, and once again Vader saw the extent of his power. Palpatine knew him down to the bone.

"If it makes you uncomfortable, you can find your own way to stop it," Palpatine said. "You and Sauro are headed for a showdown. It is up to you to choose when it will take place. I will not interfere."

"Yes, Master."

"I have just received word that the *True Justice* has been stolen. Sauro thinks I am unaware of this."

"This is another example of his poor planning," Vader said. "A ship can be more vulnerable than trying prisoners in a court."

Palpatine waved a hand. "It was an interesting idea to try. But this is why I have called you here. Sauro is overextended. He has to find that ship and cover his tracks. He cannot afford to take care of Bog Divinian."

Vader guessed what was coming. "So I must?"

"You must control the situation. Samaria must be ours."

"It will be done, Master."

Vader turned and walked out, his cape sweeping behind him.

Palpatine heard the doors hiss shut.

He had worried his apprentice. Darth Vader did not want Sauro to gather any Force-sensitives. Especially children. It would serve as reminders of things he thought he needed to forget.

He didn't need to forget them.

He needed to glory in what he had done.

He needed to scorn what he had lost.

Jude Watson

Sauro would not be successful in his quest. He was not as clever as he thought. Only a Sith or a Jedi could find a Force-sensitive. Perhaps Sauro could stumble across one or two and point to his success. It did not matter.

What mattered was Ferus Olin.

The Emperor laughed. All Masters tested their apprentices from time to time.

This would test Darth Vader most of all.

Chapter Fifteen

Quintus—or whoever was posing as the deceased Quintus—was behind the door. The question was how to get in.

“Why don’t we just knock?” Clive asked in a whisper.

“They’ll have an exit plan,” Ferus said, disagreeing. “Can’t you break in?”

“I’m insulted. I’m not a thief! Do you really think I can break a security door?”

“Just do it.”

“All right.” Clive reached into the pocket of his tunic. He withdrew a small fusioncutter, a coin, and a sharpened piece of plastoid. He bent over the security keypad with the items. Within seconds, the door clicked open.

They entered silently. They were in a short hallway. A door to a fresher was off to their right.

Ferus waited, listening, searching for evidence of the Living Force.

“No one is here,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“I know.” He walked inside the apartment. It was sparsely furnished. He carefully looked around, then crossed to the small kitchen and opened cabinets.

“Hungry?”

Jude Watson

“No one is living here. But someone is trying to make it look that way.”

“So it’s a dead end.”

Ferus crossed back to the living area. He looked out the window to the skeletal unfinished tower next door. “I know where to look,” he said.

The turbolift shafts had not been completed. There was only an exterior lift for the workers to access the roof. Ferus and Clive took the stairs. The workforce was on the roof today. They could hear the noise of turbohammers dimly echoing through the building.

Ferus followed the trail as though he was tracking someone through the woods. He saw the imprint of work boots in the dust from the construction, but he was looking for something unique—the footprints of a child.

He found them on a landing on the twenty-second floor. He lost them on the thirtieth and found them again on the thirty-sixth. At last he stopped on the sixty-second floor.

There were only four apartments per floor. One had no door and was still being worked on. They were now on the highest partially completed floor. Ferus listened at the door of the remaining three apartments. “This one,” he said. “Open it.”

Again Clive worked his magic and the door slid open silently. They took a few cautious steps into the empty hall.

They heard something, a murmur of a female voice.

They moved closer.

“...And that doesn’t mean you don’t keep up with your lessons.”

A boy’s voice. “But I don’t have any teachers.”

“I’m your teacher now. Do it or you’ll turn into a horned hairy urchin toad.”

The boy giggled.

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Ferus and Clive exchanged a look. It sounded like a typical exchange between a mother and a child. Could this be the home of the daring saboteur? Ferus risked a quick look around the corner.

The room was bright with light and furnished with only a table and bright cushions on the floor. On the floor sat a young boy of about eight years, with dark hair. He was bent over a datapad. Cross-legged next to him was a woman with close-cropped dark hair. She was dressed in a flight suit.

She looked up, and there was no fear in her gaze when she saw Ferus. Her hand drifted to her side.

"I wouldn't do that," he said softly.

Her hand stopped. He saw the glint of a blaster, concealed in the pocket of her flight suit.

Something about her face was familiar. What was it? He knew her. He had a sudden memory of a woman with tumbling dark curls.

"You're Astri Divinian," he said. "Bog's wife."

She rose smoothly. "I'm Astri Oddo. Bog is no longer my husband. This is my son, Lune. Who are you—and how did you get in?"

"We met once, years ago. Very briefly. At the Galactic Games on Euceron. I was with the Jedi team that supervised the games. Ferus Olin."

He saw her response in her quickened breathing. "A Jedi? That's impossible. They were all...wiped out."

"I left the Jedi Order years ago."

He watched as she moved to block Lune. She did it casually, as though she were edging closer to study him. Astri had been a great friend of the Jedi. Why would she consider him a threat? He felt something....

Something...He reached out with the Force, searching...

"Have you come to arrest me?" she asked. Behind her back, she put a hand on Lune's shoulder.

Jude Watson

"I don't work for the Samarian government, or for the Empire," Ferus said. "But I was asked to find you."

"By whom?"

"That's not important." Ferus crouched down in front of Lune. He held out his hand. The laser lasso was in his palm. "Did you lose this?"

"You found it!" The boy took it from him. "I didn't know where it was." He unfurled it, and it snaked around the room, fast and agile. He lassooed a small cushion and sent it flying, somersaulting through the air. He laughed.

"Lune! Don't do that." Astri's voice was tight.

Ferus turned to her. "Is there somewhere we can talk?"

"The kitchen." Astri turned to Lune, and in a soft but firm voice said, "Stay here and finish your lesson."

The three adults moved into the tiny kitchen. Ferus could feel Astri's fear. He just wasn't sure what, exactly, she was afraid of.

Despite her fear, she turned to them defiantly. "Did Bog hire you?"

"No," Ferus said. "Does he know you sabotaged the computer system of this planet?"

She was at first surprised, but then shook her head. "He doesn't know I'm involved. I doubt he'd think I was capable of it."

"Lune is Force-sensitive."

She bit her lip. "Yes."

"How long have you known?"

"Since he was four. I had my suspicions, let me say. He was different...the way he anticipated things. Obi-Wan once told me the story of Anakin Skywalker. I remembered."

"Does the boy know?"

Astri shook her head. "He knows he's different. That's all. Bog didn't know for a long time. I left him shortly before the Clone Wars, after the attack on Chancellor Palpatine. I knew Bog was involved. I knew he'd tried to discredit the Jedi in the Senate.

And I knew,” Astri said, her eyes dry, her mouth tight, “that he would take my son to punish me.”

“What happened?”

“My father, Didi, died during the war, and we came here. Bog somehow got into power again and he used that power to find me. I let him see Lune against my better instincts. One day they were playing, and Lune...he suspended a laserball in midair. Bog realized what it meant. Now he wants him...for something, something for the Emperor, I don’t know what. I only know he wants to take him away.”

“Wait a minute,” Clive interjected. “You sabotaged the records of an entire planet so that your ex-husband won’t get his hands on his own son?”

Astri’s dark eyes flashed. Ferus had forgotten how lovely she was. He remembered that she’d been very close to Obi-Wan. He wished he could tell her that Obi-Wan was still alive. But that was a secret he could not share with anyone.

“Bog fathered that child but did not raise him,” she said angrily. “He had no interest in him except as a bargaining chip to keep me in line. We haven’t been able to leave the planet. Now he wants to take him from me to curry favor from the Emperor. He is to be raised on Coruscant, he told me.”

“But you’ve thrown the whole planet into chaos, endangered lives,” Ferus said. “Medical records have been lost, financial records...”

“All to protect one boy,” Clive said.

“Yes,” she said. “I would do that to protect one boy.”

Ferus leaned against the kitchen counter. What was he going to do? How could he sacrifice Lune? Astri didn’t know the Emperor was a Sith. If she knew that, she would fight even harder.

If he turned them in, Lune would be raised with evil. He could even become a Sith...or killed like the Jedi had been killed.

“I’m begging you,” Astri said. “Can you please let us go?”

Jude Watson

Ferus suddenly felt off balance. He crossed to the window and looked out but saw nothing. Yet he knew. The Force was warning him.

Since they'd been in the building, background noise had hummed—the noise of airspeeders landing in the adjacent parking garages, of turbohammers on the roof.

Clive had noticed it, too. “It’s awfully quiet.”

“Something is wrong,” Ferus said. “The dark side has arrived.”

Chapter Sixteen

Ferus left Clive with Astri and took the stairs. He Force-leaped down, going from one landing to another. He could feel the heavy, enveloping dark side of the Force like a shroud over the building. He had one overwhelming thought: A Sith was near.

He stood inside the stairwell and cracked the door to the unfinished lobby. The work vehicles were gone, as were the gravsleds and the camas. Suddenly he caught a glimpse of a prowler droid. He followed the droid's flight until it landed...

...And found Darth Vader leading a squadron across the courtyard.

They must have just arrived. Darth Vader, his cloak billowing out behind him, was instructing teams of stormtroopers and giving orders to droids. Prowlers were sent flying in the air.

Ferus took the stairs again, soaring into Force-leaps that brought him back up to Astri's door faster than a turbolift.

He hurried inside. Astri and Clive were still in the same place in the kitchen.

"We've got trouble," he said. "It's Darth Vader. He's directing a door-to-door search. Stormtroopers are guarding the exits, and droids are conducting the search and entering the hangars. There looks to be at least fifteen or twenty prowlers, too."

Jude Watson

"There are hundreds of apartments," Astri said.

"This is Darth Vader," Ferus said. "It won't take him long. The good news is that he's starting with the inhabited buildings."

"So, how do we get out of here?" Clive asked.

Astri looked at both of them. "You won't turn me in?"

"We won't," Ferus promised. He tried not to think about Roan. He had to have hope that he had already been rescued.

"If we can get to the Tower One hangar, I have a star cruiser," Astri said.

"The droids will be all over the hangars," Clive said. "And if we go out the front, the stormtroopers will get us."

"There is always a way," Astri said.

Ferus looked at her, surprised. "That's what Obi-Wan used to say."

"He was my friend, too," she said with a sad smile.

Chapter Seventeen

“We have a problem,” Oryon said. “I’ve checked the comm system, and there’s no way we can send a message to Ferus. It will get picked up by Sauro.”

Solace leaned over the holographic map. “We’re close to Samaria. We could just go there.”

“It’s closed to everything but Imperial traffic.”

“We *are* Imperial traffic.”

“I have no doubt,” Oryon said, “that they know we’ve hijacked the ship. I’ll change the ID profile and hope for the best.”

“Change it to an Imperial diplomatic ship,” Solace advised. “Come on, Trever. Let’s find some uniforms.”

Trever left the cockpit with Solace. They searched several storage rooms and came up with Imperial officer uniforms for everyone. Quickly, the group pulled them on.

It wasn’t long before they approached the landing platform at Sath. Oryon transmitted their identification. They waited. They all knew that if their ruse didn’t work, they could be blasted right out of the sky.

“If they don’t answer soon, we go in anyway,” Solace muttered.

Jude Watson

Just then the confirmation code flashed. “We’re in,” Oryon said.

Trever looked down as Sath drew closer. The city looked impossibly big. “How are we going to find Ferus?” he asked.

“We’ll find him,” Solace promised. “We can activate the homing signal on his comlink now that we’re on the same planet.”

The dockmaster gave a quick look at their ID docs and waved them through. “All checked in, watch out in the space lanes, controls not functioning today,” he said in a breath and hurried off.

They went down into the cargo hold and piled into the cruiser. They zoomed out into the chaotic space lanes of Sath. Solace took the pilot seat, confidently zigzagging through the snarled air traffic. As they approached the coordinates, she slowed down, then made a wide turn around the Fountain Towers.

“Something’s going on down there,” she said.

“Those are security vehicles,” Oryon observed.

“Stormtroopers,” Trever said.

The ship dipped down. “I’m going in,” Solace said, parking it close by but out of sight range of the building lobby. They piled out.

“Just act like you belong,” Solace said.

Dressed as Imperial officers, no one stopped them as they headed purposefully into the building. Stormtroopers were stopping any residents and requesting ID docs as they arrived or departed, but Solace’s group was waved through.

“Ferus is here somewhere,” Solace murmured.

Trever suddenly saw something that made him feel as though ice had been dumped down his neck. “Vader,” he said. “Over there.”

They ducked down a hallway. Solace crept back to survey the situation.

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“Vader is leading the search,” she said. “We’ve got to find Ferus first.”

Chapter Eighteen

“We’ve got to go up,” Ferus said.

“There is no up,” Astri told him. “There are just beams up there. No access to the hangar.”

“That’s where we have to go,” Ferus said. “We’ll just have to figure out a way to get across to the hangar. Can Lune make it?”

“He’s just a boy!” Astri protested.

“I can make it, Mom.” The boy stood in the doorway, looking suddenly more mature than his years.

Astri’s face softened. “I know you can.”

They started as they heard a rapid knocking on the door. Clive reached for his blaster, as did Astri.

But Ferus smiled. He knew that knock.

He hurried down the hall and opened the door. Solace, Oryon, Trever. And Dona and Roan.

He and Roan grabbed each other’s upper arms in their special greeting. “You’re free!” Ferus said.

“Thanks to your friends.”

“We couldn’t contact you from the ship, so we thought we’d just drop by,” Solace said, striding in. “I assume you know Vader is downstairs.”

“I decided to wait before I said hello to him,” Ferus said.

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He quickly filled them in on who Astri was and what they had to do.

“Can we all fit in your cruiser?” Solace asked her.

“It will be a squeeze, but I think we can manage it,” she answered.

“Since we’re wearing Imperial uniforms, we might be able to leave with extra passengers,” Solace said. “We’ve got an Imperial ship waiting at the spaceport, but there’s no telling when they’ll double-check our landing docs.”

Astri looked relieved. “That solves the problem of how to get out of the planetary atmosphere. They’ll blast Samarian ships, no questions asked. Luckily everyone has obeyed the order.”

Solace halted and gave Astri a keen look.

“I don’t believe you told us everything,” she said. “Sure, you’d do anything to protect your son. But you wouldn’t put other beings in danger, would you?”

“The people of Samaria are inconvenienced, but not in danger,” Astri admitted. “I acted with the permission of Aaren Larker.”

“The prime minister of Samaria?” Clive asked.

Astri nodded. “Larker was the one who concocted the plan to sabotage the data system. We saved the med records and secretly transported them to the hospitals and doctors. Larker hired me to do it—ever since leaving Bog, I’ve made a living as a programmer.”

“You’re one of the best slicers I’ve come across,” Ferus said, using the galactic nickname for a talented computer code expert.

“I took the job because I wanted to help, but I also wanted to disappear. One of my conditions was that I could wipe my identity and Lune’s records from the Samarian system. I thought I’d take off right after, but I was delayed, and then the Empire closed the spaceport so fast...”

“They can be very fast when they want to,” Clive said.

“So why did Larker do it?” Ferus asked.

Jude Watson

“He knows that the Empire is planning to take over the planet. He decided to break down the system in order to give the Sathans time to form a resistance cell. When the system comes back up, some records will be gone, such as who fought on the side of the Republic in the Clone Wars, or who criticized Emperor Palpatine when he was still a chancellor. They’ll have to start from scratch to find their enemies.”

“Enough talking,” Solace said. “Let’s move.”

Astri put her hand on Lune’s shoulder. “We’re ready.”

Ferus squatted in front of the boy. “Lune, we’re going to have to climb on the roof and walk across a beam. We’ll be very high.”

“I have good balance,” the boy said.

“I’m sure you do. When we’re up there, I want you to try something. Trust your feelings. Try not to think, only feel. Let the air help you.”

“What he means is—” Astri started.

“I know what he means, Mom,” Lune said. His gray-blue eyes were clear as he nodded at Ferus.

Ferus nodded back. A connection passed between them, one he knew was fueled by the Force. Someday, he hoped, Lune would know what that meant.

They walked out of the apartment. They could hear the whistling of the wind around the girders on the roof.

“Stay back!” Solace suddenly said.

She and Ferus turned at the same moment as two prowler droids crashed through the hallway window. The two Jedi leaped up as one, and slashed through them. Smoking, the droids crashed to the ground.

“They had time to transmit our position. We have to move quickly,” Ferus said.

They raced up the stairs. The wind hit them full in the face as they stepped out onto the partially completed roof. Girders and beams crisscrossed the area closest to the hangar in the adjoining tower. Ferus stayed close to Lune and kept a careful eye on Trever.

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He and Solace concentrated the Force. This was a difficult task for any Jedi, especially one who had never achieved Master status. To lift a heavy object in the air using only the Force took great concentration.

No, Ferus told himself, remembering the lessons of Yoda. *Not concentration. Belief.*

The beam rose in the air, rotated, and traveled across the empty air to the hangar tower next door. It entered one of the openings and shuddered as it hit. It held.

They now had a bridge to cross over. Hundreds of kilometers in the air, with no railing...but a bridge.

"Solace, you lead Astri and Lune over," Ferus said.

Astri and Lune balanced on the beam. The wind blew, pushing Lune's hair in his eyes. He didn't flinch. He appeared perfectly balanced.

"I'm letting the air help me," he called to Ferus.

"You can do it," Ferus said.

Solace stayed between them. They walked single file across the beam. Lune never faltered. He never looked down. He walked across the beam as though he was strolling across a park on a sunny day.

"Now I've seen true courage," Clive said.

Ferus turned to agree that the boy was amazing. He saw that Clive was watching Astri.

Solace, Astri, and Lune reached the other side. Astri hugged her son to her side.

"Your turn, Trever," Ferus said.

Clive crooked an arm for Dona. "I'll escort you to the beam, madam."

Dona nodded. "Don't worry about me—I live on a mountain. I can do it."

Trever, Dona, and Clive started across the beam.

Roan waited with Ferus. They watched as the trio inched across the beam.

Jude Watson

Suddenly Ferus was alert to an intruder. A prowler was streaking toward the beam. In the hangar tower, Solace had seen it, too. Dona ducked, almost losing her balance, but Clive grabbed her arm. Another prowler zoomed upward.

“Don’t move!” Ferus shouted to Roan. Then he Force-leaped across the space, soaring toward the aggressors as Solace did the same. In midair, the two Jedi slashed through the droids, sailed past each other and both landed on the beam as lightly as drifting snow.

“Ferus!”

Roan was leaping from beam to beam, avoiding beam fire from two spider droids that had appeared on the partially finished roof. Ferus jumped back to the roof, deflecting the fire. He landed behind the two spider droids and slashed at them with his lightsaber, turning them into molten metal.

“I’m beginning to like this Jedi business,” Roan said.

Across the way, Trever, Dona, and Clive were now safe in the tower. Roan and Ferus hurried to the beam and walked quickly across. “Okay, now comes the hard part,” Ferus said.

“My cruiser is three levels down,” Astri whispered. “The ramps are at each end.”

They moved toward the ramps that linked the levels. They couldn’t risk taking the turbolift. They were almost down the ramp when they heard a squad of stormtroopers heading up. It was too late to retreat; the troopers had spotted them. The commander gave the order to fire.

Ferus and Solace raced forward as the troopers began firing. Their lightsabers whirled as they charged. Roan and Oryon stayed behind, firing their blasters. Clive and Astri placed themselves in front of Dona, Trever, and Lune, their blasters in hand.

Ferus was not used to fighting with Solace. Her style surprised him. She was a loner, and, at this point, a reluctant Jedi. But her fighting style was as generous as it was aggressive. Her leaps were liquid, and she seemed to be everywhere at once, protecting

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Ferus and guiding them all downward even as she vanquished the troopers. Ferus couldn't read her intentions as quickly as he should, but it didn't matter. She read his. She countered his moves, reinforced his strikes, and covered his back.

When the clones were littered around them, he deactivated his lightsaber and nodded at her in admiration. "Thanks."

They continued on, down to the next level. More prowler droids flew toward them, and Ferus cut them down in three clean strikes.

"They're going to send more firepower now," Solace said. "They know where we are."

They raced down the last ramp toward the cruiser. Solace leaped into the pilot seat. Dona hurried inside along with Clive. Oryon sat next to Solace. Roan jumped in behind Solace, squeezing himself into the cockpit behind the laser cannon controls. Astri and Lune were next.

Suddenly an explosion rocked the hangar. A pair of droidekas had entered and were blasting at a load-bearing column. The column soon crashed to the floor.

The roof overhead began to cave, cracks spreading rapidly. The duracrete underneath their feet began to shift. Ferus grabbed Lune with one hand and Trever with the other. Oryon reached out and yanked Astri inside the craft.

"Lune!" Astri screamed.

With a thunderous roar, half of the level above collapsed. Ferus dove for cover with the two boys as the droidekas continued their deadly blasts.

Solace gunned the engines and soared away from the flying debris. She hovered outside in the air while Roan manned the laser cannons. He made one accurate shot, blasting one droideka and sending the flaming mass of metal into the other one.

Ferus rolled to his feet, coughing out the dust. "Discord missile!" he shouted, spotting one in the air. He knew from his Clone Wars service that it was filled with a flock of buzz droids,

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those lethal droids that could adhere to a starfighter going at top speed and drill into it, disabling it in seconds.

Solace dove away, but the discord missile kept tracking.

Lune suddenly sent his laser lasso flying. It was a clean red line in the air, flying outward toward the missile. Ferus held his breath. He could feel the Force in the air as Lune unknowingly used it to guide the lasso. Lune may not have been aware of what the Force was, but his mother was in danger and he would make it work for him.

The lasso snaked around the missile, hard enough to yank it slightly off course. It crashed into the side of the hangar. Solace zoomed away, under fire from the ground now.

More stormtroopers were spilling up the ramp, blaster rifles firing. Ferus released Trevor and kept the two boys behind him as his lightsaber arced in the air, deflecting fire. While he moved backward, he considered what to do. Solace was circling around, trying to avoid fire and get back inside the hangar. The battalion was between her and Ferus. More were coming every moment. One of them fired a missile and it hit only meters away. Ferus felt the heat of the blast on his face.

Thinking frantically, Ferus jumped onto a small airspeeder. He shepherded Trevor and Lune inside, then started the engine. "Drive!" he ordered Trevor. He leaped onto the back of the speeder, lightsaber in hand, and deflected fire. Trevor took off.

"Where to?" Trevor shouted.

"The roof next door!" Ferus dropped back into the speeder as Trevor pushed the engines. They shot out into the air and straight over to the roof. Here they were finally out of range of the blasterfire and missiles.

"Let me take over," Ferus said, reaching for the controls. He zoomed over the beams, searching. Then he dove the craft down into an unfinished turbolift shaft. Safe for the moment, he let the craft hover.

"What now?" Trevor asked.

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Ferus thought carefully back on the design of the tower. He knew the wall would be thin near the roof, since the reinforcing durasteel hadn't been added.

"Solace will find us," Ferus said. He directed the craft up the shaft and maneuvered it closer to the wall. "I need you to do something for me."

Trever saw the order in Ferus's eyes. He shook his head. "No. I'm not leaving you. Not again."

"You have to. You have to take Lune."

"I can take care of myself," Lune said.

Trever sighed. He knew he had to go. "Every time I leave you, you end up captured."

"Not this time. The Emperor wants me free. I don't know why, but he needs me. All I have to do is walk out. I can buy time until you can get away. Trever, it's the only way."

Trever nodded. "All right. But just so you know, you can't get rid of me for good."

"I know." Ferus activated his lightsaber. He buried it in the wall. It glowed, and the wall began to disintegrate, peeling back on itself. Lune watched, wide-eyed.

"I've never seen a Jedi in action before," he said. "I wish I could do that."

"Maybe someday you will," Ferus said. He jumped onto the partially demolished wall. Hanging on with one hand, he scanned the air. He was high over Sath, on the opposite side from the lobby. Stormtroopers were specks below him, lined up and ready to receive orders. Several seeker droids zoomed below but hadn't tracked him yet. He saw no sign of Darth Vader but still felt his presence.

A glint on a wing, and Solace was diving, heading for him.

"You're going to have to be quick," he told Trever.

Trever balanced on the speeder, holding Lune by the hand. He stepped carefully onto the wall, helping Lune to stand beside him. They balanced there, waiting, while Solace cut back on the engines.

Jude Watson

She expertly guided the craft to nudge against the wall. Astri's face was white with suspense.

Lune and Trever stepped easily into the craft and were pulled into seats by Astri's eager hands.

"Get to the base. I'll join you," Ferus shouted over the wind to Solace.

He watched as the ship zoomed away. Then he turned, jumped into the borrowed speeder, and raced back up to the roof. He picked his way past the blasted beams and took the stairs down to street level to meet Darth Vader.

Chapter Nineteen

The dark side was so strong that Ferus felt like he was being engulfed by it as he walked up to Vader. He had to pull himself together and act as normal as he could, not like he'd just fought a heated battle.

"I think we're tracking the same person," he told Vader. "Any luck?"

Vader didn't answer for a moment. A long moment. Ferus tried not to sweat. All he could hear was the tunnel-echo whooshing of Vader's electronic breath-mask.

"Several battalions of droids and troopers have been demolished. Prowler droids as well. The saboteur has help."

"Lucky that you came prepared," Ferus said, indicating the armed activity around him.

"Strange. Captain Chainly reported that lightsabers were involved."

"That doesn't seem likely," Ferus said, relieved that he'd hidden his own.

Vader didn't answer. "Do you have the saboteur's name?"

"Quintus Farel," Ferus answered.

"That is an alias."

"That's all I have. The apartment was empty when I got there."

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“You took a long time to find me.”

“I was searching. I thought we should work together.”

“I work alone.”

He could not have bested Darth Vader in battle. Ferus knew that. But he had won this round simply by walking out the door. For some reason, he had the protection of the Emperor. As long as he had that, Vader couldn’t touch him.

Vader didn’t have to speak. Ferus knew he was angry. He could feel how difficult it was for Vader to suppress it. Behind his words was fury and frustration. He had gotten to him just by standing here, just by existing...

Something tickled Ferus’s memory. Something familiar about this scene. What was it? He felt there was something here that he should be able to grasp but couldn’t.

“Lord Vader?” Vader’s comlink crackled. “Space cruiser seen leaving the area, sir.”

“Go after it!” Vader commanded.

“Too late for pursuit, sir. I sent a patrol ship after it.”

“Send everything you have.”

Vader switched off the comlink. “It does not matter,” he said. “They cannot leave the planet.”

The helmet turned back toward Ferus. The blank eyes seemed to study him. Then Vader turned and walked off, his cape swirling behind him.

Chapter Twenty

Keets and Curran sat on the floor together in the holding room.

“What’s taking Sauro so long?” Keets asked.

“I don’t know,” Curran said. “But the longer we’re here, the better. Once we get into an Imperial detention center, we’re sunk.”

“You mean we’re not sunk now?”

The door hissed open. Zackery stood there, a reluctant look on his face. “Senate regulations say I have to send in food.”

Keets brightened. “Things are looking up.”

A cook droid wheeled in. “Things are done by the book in the Senate, young man,” she advised Zackery.

“Don’t call me young man!” Zackery shouted at her.

“Sorry, old man!” the droid trilled.

Zackery snorted and stamped out, but left the door ajar. He stood, his hand on his blaster, and watched.

Keets looked at the droid closely. Despite the fresh paint job, he recognized the antique droid WA-7. It was the same droid that had worked in Dexter’s Diner. She’d served him sliders and the slop Dex called a drink at least a hundred times.

Yes, things were definitely looking up.

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She placed a tray on the floor next to them. A large pot of liquid, two mugs, and two veg turnovers. She took the items off the tray and then took the tray away again. "Enjoy!" she said.

She began to wheel out. Keets reached for the cups.

"I'm not thirsty," Curran said.

"Oh, you'll like this." As soon as WA-7 was between them and Zackery, Keets took the small blaster out of the pot.

Curran's reaction time was excellent for a once-bookish senatorial aide. He jumped to his feet and charged as Keets moved forward with the blaster. At the same moment, WA-7 threw the heavy metal tray at Zackery's neck. It hit him hard, and he staggered backward. Keets flipped the blaster and used the hilt to knock him on the head. Zackery fell heavily.

Keets turned to the three security droids and blasted them into smoking metal.

Keets and Curran stepped over Zackery's inert body. They peered out into the hallway. The Senate was coming to life again as Senators, aides, and droids reported for work. Intent on their business, no one gave them a second glance. Together with WA-7, they moved into the stream of workers.

"I suggest a fast exit," WA-7 said. "I can find my own way out. Say hello to Dex for me!"

She wheeled away. Keets and Curran knew the Senate building as well as the homes they'd grown up in. Within moments, they had found the closest exit. They were free.

Chapter Twenty-One

Solace steered Astri's star cruiser straight into the hold. They all climbed out and made their way to the cockpit.

"So far so good," Oryon muttered. "No Imperial guards rushing the ship."

"Contact the dockmaster and get clearance," Solace said. "That will be the real test. I'll start the departure checks."

They all stayed in the cockpit, too anxious to find seating. Astri kept Lune close by her side.

"Request permission to take off," Oryon spoke into the comm unit.

"Checking data," the dockmaster replied.

Minutes ticked by.

They exchanged worried glances.

"It's taking too long," Solace said.

"Of course they changed the registry numbers!" Sauro screamed at the Imperial officer sitting at the databank that monitored all Imperial traffic. "Look for a ship that matches its description."

The officer keyed in more data. He sent another holographic space map into the air.

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“Now give me the data from every spaceport near its last known position,” Sauro said, pacing behind him.

“Senator, there is a ship on the landing platform on Samaria...”

Sauro stopped pacing. Samaria! Of course. The hijacking hadn’t been random at all. They’d gone straight to the planet where Ferus Olin was. How could he have missed it? He’d been so blind.

“That’s it. Get me the dockmaster, now.”

“The spaceport is still in the hands of the Samaritans, sir, not us—”

“Just get him!”

A moment later, an obviously nervous dockmaster was on the comm.

“Yes, there is an Imperial ship. It’s a diplomatic ship. It’s been cleared for departure.”

“Stop that ship! Now!” Sauro shouted.

“But sir, it’s an *Imperial* ship,” the dockmaster said patiently. “You must have misunderstood me. All Imperial ships are cleared to—”

“Listen to me.” Sauro leaned toward the comm. “Revoke the order and stop that ship or I will personally escort you to an Imperial prison for the rest of your life.”

“Ah, sir, I’m sorry. But I’m afraid the clearance has already been granted. The ship just cleared Samaritan airspace. Sir.”

Sauro slammed his hand down on the console, breaking two sensors.

His assistant hovered by his elbow. “Sir,” he whispered. “The Emperor would like to see you. Now.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Darth Vader left the mess of the botched pursuit behind and climbed into his custom-made airspeeder. He sat for a moment as his driver waited for orders.

Ferus Olin. So insignificant that Vader had forgotten about him. He had been a blip in his past. Something that had happened long ago, a small jealousy that had never blossomed into a real, mature hatred. He would have been happy never to have seen him again.

But of course he survived the Clone Wars. He hadn't been a Jedi.

Vader didn't think of him as a rival. He had never even achieved the status of a Jedi. He had left as a Padawan. A student. Ferus couldn't come close to matching his power.

But why was he here? Why had his Master employed him at all?

There could be only one answer. Ferus could be one of the few left in the galaxy capable of becoming a Sith apprentice. Capable of being trained, capable of rising to the heights of power.

Of course it was laughable to think this could be the case. But perhaps his Master didn't think it so laughable.

Vader was still hampered by the incredible injuries he'd endured. He could never have the full power the Emperor had. It

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was the unspoken thing between them. The thing he could never change.

Vader let his artificial hands relax before they clenched.

No, Ferus was not a serious threat. But he had won anyway, had he not? The saboteur had escaped. Ferus had aided in that escape. Of that he had no doubt.

Had there been another lightsaber? Had Ferus found another Jedi?

The old jealousy surged in him, the old envy.

He didn't try to dismiss it. Now he knew how to use it.

The deeply enjoyable part of his conversion to the dark side of the Force was this feeling of sureness. The dark side eliminated doubt.

He never wanted to live with doubt again.

He never wanted to be reminded of what he'd been.

He nodded to his driver, who pushed the speeder engines and lifted the craft into the air. He would control this situation. Sauro was not the problem now.

Ferus Olin was.

Ferus stood concealed behind one of the columns of the spaceport and watched as the Imperial ship took off from the landing platform in Sath. He had to be sure his friends were safe.

What now?

He turned his face toward the city. Astri had managed to tell him how to solve the problem with the BRT droid computer. If Larker gave the okay, the city could be back to normal as early as tomorrow morning, the changes made to protect those fighting the Empire.

He was anxious to return to the secret base. Anxious to see the progress Raina and Toma had made, anxious to see how Garen was faring. And it was hard to say good-bye to Roan. It would have been good to ride through the atmospheric storm to

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get to the asteroid. Good to be with friends. To rest, even for just a day.

But something was telling him not to leave. Things had changed. He had taken on a job for the Emperor. He was now working for the Empire, at least on the surface. He was certain that Palpatine didn't trust him, but that wouldn't prevent him from becoming a double agent.

He was certain that Palpatine would have another job for him, and soon. They were both aware of the game they were playing.

He would risk it.

Risk it, and learn what he could. He'd enter the heart of the darkness he hated and feared.

He would need all his strength, he knew, to survive it.

End of Volume One
Concluded In Volume Two

About the Author

JUDE WATSON is the *New York Times* best-selling author of the Jedi Quest and Jedi Apprentice series, as well as the Star Wars Journals *Darth Maul*, *Queen Amidala*, and *Princess Leia: Captive to Evil*. She currently lives in the Pacific Northwest.

About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.